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THE ODYSSEY OF
EUPHEMIA TRACY



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THE ODYSSEY OF EUPHEMIA TRACY)

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EUPHEMIA paused in her washing up—the dishcloth in one hand, a large piece of yellow soap in the other—and let her eyes rest dreamily on the calendar that hung over the gas bracket. Jan. 18th. Dates meant little enough in Euphemia's life, but this one seemed vaguely familiar. For a moment or two she stood puzzling over it. Then her brows relaxed, and she smiled the faint triumphant smile of one who has solved a problem. Jan. 18th. . . . It was her birthday, of course. She poured away the water and began to dry the cups and saucers and plates—two of each—that stood on the draining-board. She dried them carefully, polishing each one till its glazed surface shone, but her gaze was absent, and the frown had returned to her brow. She *couldn't* be forty. . . . It was ridiculous. Still—no amount of calculation could make her less. She had been born in 1800, and so she must be forty. It was a long time since she had considered her age. She had been vaguely aware for some years that she was "in the thirties." But—forty.

A curious chill crept over her, and she stood again motionless, gazing unseeingly in front of her. Forty was old. . . .

A sudden ferocious bellow from upstairs roused her. She called "Coming in a minute, father," and began to put the crockery away in the little cupboard. Before she had finished, a second bellow sounded, louder, more ferocious than the first. She glanced at the milk-jug and teapot that still stood on the draining-board, decided that they must stay there for the present, took off her apron, folded it, slipped it into a drawer in the dresser, and went slowly up

the steep narrow staircase. Forty. . . Somehow she couldn't believe that she was forty.

At the top of the staircase she paused outside a door that was ajar, then pushed it open and descended two steps into a bedroom with a low ceiling and tiny lattice window. Though it was the "best bedroom" of the little cottage, it was so small that the old-fashioned brass bedstead on to which the door opened seemed at first to take up the whole of it. The old man who lay there turned his head sharply as she entered. His thin grey face was twisted into lines of pain and ill-humour, and his scraggy neck gave him an odd vulture-like appearance.

"Well," he rasped in a high-pitched, querulous voice, "how much longer are you going to keep me waiting?"

She answered him reassuringly, as if he were a fractious child.

"Now, father, I've only just taken your tea things down. I've not even had time to wash them up properly yet."

Her voice, deep and slow and placid, seemed to increase his irritation.

"I suppose you think I can lie here all day doing nothing."

"I was reading to you all afternoon, father. And George Earnshaw's coming in this evening, you know."

She straightened his bedclothes and turned his pillow with large capable hands, then stood looking down at him in silence.

She was thinking: He's been like this for forty years. It hurts him even to move. He'll never walk again.

The dreadfulness of the thought that she was forty was drowned in the dreadfulness of that thought.

"Don't stand there like a stuck pig," he shot out, glaring up at her venomously from under his bushy brows. "Read to me, can't you?"

"What shall I read?" she said pleasantly. "I read the paper to you this afternoon."

His voice grew shrill and unsteady with exasperation.

"Read it again, then. D'you think anyone can take it in with one reading?"

She sat down on the chair by the bed and began to read aloud slowly and clearly.

As he watched her, his expression of malevolence deepened almost to hatred. He was not listening to the words she read. He had not wished to be read to. He would have preferred to sleep. But it was torment to him to let her go out of the range of his bullying, and the thought of her downstairs—resting, perhaps, or reading to herself—had been intolerable. All the lusty, healthy powers of his mind and body had been distorted by his illness into a desire to torment first his wife and now his daughter. He suffered continually and, obscurely, subconsciously, he was determined that those around him should suffer too. His wife had died of it more than twenty years ago. Euphemia remained maddeningly unmoved by it. Never once had he even been able to make her cry though he had driven her mother to tears daily. To Euphemia he was a sick child and his bullying a sick child's fractiousness. The knowledge that it was from pity and not from fear that she submitted to him made him hate her as, despite his constant unkindness, he had never hated his wife.

He gazed resentfully at her large, powerful frame. He could keep her running up and down stairs all day, and yet she never seemed tired. Those steep narrow stairs had been one of his most potent weapons against his wife. Nothing seemed to exhaust Euphemia. He hated her for the healthiness of her body as much as for the imperturbability of her mind. Then his eyes rested on her face, and he felt a sudden sharp stab of malicious pleasure. It was sallow, heavy-featured, unattractive. Even when she sat motionless, as now, there was something ungainly and awkward about her, something that reminded one of the clumsiness of a growing girl. He came of yeoman stock, and, though he himself had been slight and frail and dapper even before his accident, his daughter seemed to have inherited the unwieldy build of the men who had ploughed and dug and felled trees on the Sussex farm that his forbears had owned.

Watching her, he thought with a strange, exultant triumph: She'll never get a husband. No one'll look at her.

And there won't be a penny when I'm gone. She'll have to go out to work. . . . He had a vision of Euphemia as a general servant, bullied and overworked. He set it in the scales against his pain, and his pain seemed to lighten sensibly.

And she won't always be young, he continued. Why, she must be getting on now. . . .

His mind was busy with dates and sums, when there came a knock at the front door.

Euphemia stopped reading and folded up the newspaper.

"That'll be George," she said, "I'll go and let him in."

She went down the steep dark staircase, crossed the little kitchen, and unlatched the door.

A man entered, carrying a backgammon board under his arm.

"Good evening, Euphemia," he said, as he wiped his shoes carefully on the mat. He was of medium size, neatly, and rather tightly, dressed in navy blue, with a high, well-glazed, stand-up collar and a large cravat-like tie. He had a straggling grey moustache, under which an indeterminate mouth smiled hesitantly. The removal of his well-worn bowler hat revealed a partially bald head, across which a long strand of grey hair had been evenly arranged.

"Your dad ready for his game?"

As he spoke, his eyes roved round the little kitchen, and his smile seemed to commend its air of good housewifery and cleanliness.

"Yes," said Euphemia. "He's quite ready. Will you come up?"

George Earnshaw had been their next-door neighbour ever since they had come to the little cottage, and Euphemia had never seen him without that taint hovering smile. Once she had seen him angry—so angry that the colour stood out in patches on his grey face—but even then he had smiled. Her father had long ago alienated everyone else in the village by his rudeness, and George Earnshaw was now the only visitor to the little cottage. The sole basis of their friendship was the fact that each liked a game of backgammon and that no one else in the village could play it.

There was no intimacy between them despite their daily meetings. Often they exchanged no words but the "Good evening" at the beginning and end of the game.

When they were half-way up the stairs a sudden impulse came to her to look back. Did he smile even in the dark, and when no one was watching him? Before she realised what she was doing, she had turned and was standing facing him on the narrow stairway. His smile gleamed through the dimness. Yes, he *did* smile in the dark, and when no one was watching him. Her sleeves had been rolled up to her elbows for washing the dishes, and his hand that had been stretched out to grasp the narrow railing fell instead upon her bare arm. He let it rest there for a few moments, while he smiled at her in silence. Then she turned quickly and hurried up the stairs to her father's bedroom.

Her father fixed his narrowed eyes on her as she arranged the table by the bed for their game.

He had finished his calculations. She was forty. . . It was a shining new weapon in his hand against her. She was forty. The fact almost compensated for her health and placidity. He had a sudden revealing flash of knowledge. Though she had remained unbroken in health and spirit, her youth had been spent in his service. She was middle-aged. He exulted triumphantly. She had not escaped him, after all. . .

"It's Euphemia's birthday, George," he said with mocking pleasantness. "She's forty. Growing up, ain't she?"

George's eyes turned to her and wandered up and down her figure with their furtive smile. A faint colour crept into her cheeks. Her father had taunted her a hundred times before in front of George, and she had not minded. It was not her father's taunts that she minded now. It was something in George's smile that she had never seen in it before, as his eyes crept over her, avoiding her gaze. Her flush deepened. . . The old man was delighted by the success of his ploy. He burst into a high, cackling laugh. "Watch her colour up like a young girl, George. Forty and no man as much as slipped an arm round her waist or ever wanted to. A maid *she'll* be to the end of the chapter."

His high-pitched cackle rang out again. George sat smiling, his eyes downcast.

"Here's everything ready for your game, father," said Euphemia. "Shall I leave you now?"

She spoke steadily, but she was shamefully aware of the blush that still dyed her cheek.

"Less she finds a blind man," went on her father, ignoring the question. "That's what you'd better do, 'Phemia. Find a blind man that can't see your looks."

He laughed till he gasped for breath, then leant back against his pillow, wiping his eyes. He felt better than he had felt for months.

When Euphemia had gone, George's smiling gaze remained fixed on the closed door for some moments before he opened the board and set out the pieces.

II

EUPHEMIA went up three more steps and ~~unlocked~~ the door that led into her own bedroom. The hours during which George Earnshaw played backgammon with her father were her only hours of freedom, and she generally spent them here. Even when she sat for a minute to rest in the armchair by the fireplace in the kitchen, she was braced always for the raucous shout that summoned her upstairs. When she went into the village to do her household shopping, she was aware all the time of her father angrily counting the seconds of her absence from home. But this tiny room was different. It was her kingdom. It belonged to her. As she crossed its threshold one personality seemed to drop from her and another to take its place. The personality that dropped from her was that of nurse and drudge; the personality that took its place was romantic, youthful, glowingly alive. In this personality, which had at most only one hour's existence a day, lived the girl who had been taken prisoner at her mother's death. Through all these years of unwearying performance of petty duties, no real experience had come to her, nothing had happened that could mellow or develop her. She remained at heart the girl who had taken lightly on to her shoulders the yoke that had killed her mother and had worn it ever since. She had worn it easily because it had never been real to her. The work of the house and sick room had seemed to her as meaningless as the things one does in a dream, her father a fretful child who must be humoured but whose fretfulness could not be taken seriously. She had not resented the drudgery because subconsciously she had looked upon it as something to fill

the time before the romance and glory of life began. Life, rich, glowing, colourful, would come to her as it came to everyone. Meanwhile, the drudgery would fill her time as well as anything.

But—forty. The strange feeling of chill came over her again. Surely it couldn't be that there was nothing to life but this, that what she had taken for the shadow was the substance, that life was over for her before it had begun. . . . She shook the thought from her almost fiercely as she closed the door and looked round the room. The ceiling sloped sharply over the bed, which was so near to the dressing-table that there was only just room to pass between them. It was a brave little dressing-table, hung still with the flounces of muslin and bunches of blue ribbon that the sixteen-year-old girl had pinned upon it. The patchwork quilt on the bed had been made by Euphemia's mother before her marriage, and, though its *once* bright shades had faded, it still lent a gay note of colour to the little room. *Even* the curtains, washed out as they were, flaunted a gallant pattern of sprawling roses and hollyhocks and paeonies. It was a brave, gay, gallant little room, a little room that was patiently but confidently waiting for something to happen. . . .

Euphemia sat down on the bed and stared vacantly in front of her.

On the dressing-table was an old-fashioned mirror, cracked, faded, blurred, but she did not see the faint and distorted reflection of her face that it showed her.

Euphemia instinctively avoided mirrors. She felt young and slim, and the sight of the large, heavy-featured woman who met her gaze in mirrors disconcerted her. Somehow she could never connect it with herself. . . . She rose from the bed and went over to the chair that stood by the tiny lattice window, overlooking the village street. On the wall near the window hung a miniature bookshelf containing the Chaucer, Malory, Shakespeare, Bible, and Cookery book that were her sole reading. The village schoolmaster, on retiring, had allowed each of his elder pupils to choose a book from his library, and Euphemia had chosen the Shake-

speare. The Bible and Cookery book had been her mother's; the Chaucer and Malory she had bought for 2d. each at a rummage sale. She had read them over and over again, and it had never occurred to her to want any other reading.

As she sat down, she was surprised to find that she was trembling. Something had upset her, and for a moment she could not think what it was. Her father—no, she was used to her father. He had no power to hurt her. Then she remembered the smile on George Earnshaw's lips, as he had faced her on the dark staircase, and the touch of his warm moist hand on her bare arm. Perhaps it was that. Or was it the troubling realisation of her age, the terrible suspicion that, while she sat waiting for Life, Life had passed her by? She leant forward in her chair to look down on to the wide, straggling village street, from the centre of which grew a luxuriant chestnut tree. Lady Sefton of the Hall was passing, three cocker spaniels at her heels. She wore well-cut tweeds and brogues. Her face was so delicately made up that she passed easily for twenty years younger than she really was. Euphemia craned her neck so as not to lose sight of her till she had turned from the village street into the road that led to the Hall. The sixteen-year-old Euphemia adored Rank and Beauty. In imagination she followed her up the hill, through the wrought-iron gates, and into the scenes of unexampled magnificence that formed Euphemia's mental picture of the life of the Hall. The sight of Lady Sefton had somehow restored normality to the world.

She turned her eyes again eagerly to the village street. Two girls (the doctor's daughters) came swinging home from a country walk. A woman with a baby in her arms crossed from one side to the other. A band of children ran past shouting. A man with an artificial leg stumped by, taking off his hat to one of the tiny, bow-fronted windows.

All these people were clothed with glamour in Euphemia's eyes. She thrilled to see them pass along the street, going from one romantic adventure to another. The tiny lattice window was a sort of magic casement to her. Everyone whom she saw through it led an enchanted life.

But it was the Hall on which Euphemia's most eager

interest centred. Her picture of life was a curious mixture of the Chaucer, Shakespeare, Malory, and Bible that formed her only reading, and the stories her mother had told her in her childhood—stories that were confused memories of the "place" where she had been in service, and the penny novelettes that she had read there.

Her mother had been a parlour-maid in the same house in which her father had been valet. They had been married secretly, and three months after the marriage the man had fallen from a step-ladder that he was using to reach the top of a wardrobe, injuring himself beyond hope of recovery. His employer had settled a small annuity on him, and Euphemia was born seven months after they had moved to the cottage that his employer had bought for them.

Euphemia's mother had been a pretty, faded, spiritless woman, who had patiently endured her husband's bullying until it killed her. In the long hopeless days of his illness her thoughts had gone back ceaselessly to the years of her service at Haydon Court, casting over them a glamour that they had never had at the time. She would talk about her life there to the little girl, giving her exaggerated descriptions of the loveliness and charm of Lady Angela Trevor, the handsomeness and dignity of Sir John Trevor, the general magnificence of the baronet's establishment. The glamour communicated itself to Euphemia, and she never tired of hearing about it. Before she was five she knew in detail the duty of every servant at Haydon Court. Her favourite game was to lay the baronet's dinner on the little kitchen table with plates and cutlery made of newspaper, and to wait on the guests. Occasionally Euphemia would pretend to be Lady Angela and would eat her way solemnly through an imaginary six-course meal, making polite conversation to imaginary guests, while her mother, impersonating Flowers, the butler, served her, giving *sotto voce* instructions on etiquette at the same time. Sometimes Euphemia would pretend to be the cook (she enjoyed that best of all), bustling about the kitchen, mixing imaginary sauces and savouries, issuing orders to her kitchen staff.

At other times they would both impersonate guests and

would sit at table conversing with each other in high-pitched, affected voices. The mother was simple and child-like and enjoyed the games as much as her daughter.

As Euphemia grew older, she worked in the garden, selling what produce the little family did not need to a greengrocer in Market Felton, the neighbouring country town. They made no friends among the village people. The invalid had from the first hated and despised his neighbours and had lost no time in alienating them by deliberate rudeness. He had forbidden his wife and Euphemia to have any dealings with them. His neighbours, quick to resent this attitude, extended their dislike to the child, saying that she was "stuck up," and "gave herself airs." The difference between her accent and that of their own children increased their resentment. The valet had been ambitious and, without any particular object in view, had carefully imitated the speech and manners of his employers. He ceaselessly instilled them into his daughter, partly as a sort of distorted self-glorification and partly because it gave excuse for the constant bullying that now afforded him, for all his helplessness, an elusive sense of power.

Euphemia, shy, despite the placidity that had made her, even as a child, endure her father's ill-humour with pitying indulgence, had made no friends at the village school. Later, her attendance on her father had filled every minute of her day, and with grown-up people she still felt ill-at-ease and awkward. With children, however, her awkwardness vanished, and she would often slip down to the bottom of the garden at the time when the children were coming home from school, in order to talk to them.

She drew back from her window and took some sewing from a basket behind the flounces of the dressing-table. She always made her own dresses, buying cheap material and paper patterns at the village shop. Her mother's description of the toilets of Lady Angela and her guests had given her a taste for the ultra-feminine in clothes. She liked flounces and frills and fichus. She looked a curious figure, the badly fitting dresses stretched skimpily across her big

frame, the frills and flounces consorting oddly with the sallow, heavy-featured face. As she sewed, she was in imagination accompanying Lady Sefton back to the Hall. A butler opened the front door to her. A footman, powdered and in livery, stepped forward to take her walking-stick. Another stood statue-like at the foot of the stairs. She went upstairs to the bedroom, where her French maid awaited her. The French maid helped her change and dressed her hair, wreathing into it a string of pearls and a red rose (her mother had once seen Lady Angela's hair dressed in that way), fastening diamond bracelets on to her smooth white arms.

Glancing at the cheap alarm clock that stood on the window-sill, she saw that it was time to get her father's hot milk. She folded up the frilled dress and put it in the basket behind the flounces of the dressing-table. Then she went downstairs, tied her apron round her waist, and heated the milk over the kitchen fire. She made a cup of coffee for George, put a dish of biscuits on the tray, and carried it up the steep, narrow staircase.

Her father was lying back on his pillows, watching George, who was puzzling over the board with knit brows, but still with that furtive, hovering smile.

She put the tray down on the table by the bed and stood waiting. George glanced up, and his pale smile flicked her over.

"Will you have your milk now, father?" she said.

"We might as well--eh, George? Have your coffee. Then we'll go on with the game."

It was obvious from his tone that her father was winning.

She rearranged his pillow, handed him the milk, and slipped away.

George took his coffee and began to sip it noisily without speaking. The other man's eyes were fixed on the distance, and there was a faint smile on his lips. He felt that at last he was even with Euphemia. She was forty. Her youth, for which he had hated her, did not exist. And—he had got beneath her guard. He had made her flush and tremble by his jibes as though she had been her

mother. The thought of that delighted him. Even though he never got beneath her guard again, he would always have that memory. His victory over her made him feel magnanimous. The picture of her as a general servant, bullied and overworked, that had given him such pleasure an hour ago, suddenly lost its attraction. He would be generous to a fallen foe.

"George," he said, "would you like to have Euphemia when I'm gone?"

George's smile crept furtively to the door through which Euphemia had passed.

He had never had any amorous adventures except those of the imagination, and in those of the imagination he had indulged very freely. It was partly because his imagined adventures were so unbridled that he had shrunk from making test of actuality. He was shy, with the shyness of the sensual man who tries to hide his sensuality both from himself and others. He had always meant to marry sooner or later. Apart from every other consideration, a man needed a wife to look after his house. It came cheaper than paying outside women. But he had never looked on Euphemia as a possible wife till today. And today, when she had turned to him on the dark staircase and he had laid his hand on her arm, the nearness of her large body and the touch of the firm, warm flesh beneath his hand had suddenly fired his blood. Then, almost immediately afterwards, he had seen her sallow cheeks flame and her eyes brighten beneath her father's taunts, so that she looked beautiful for the first time since he had known her.

"She'd make any man a good wife," went on Euphemia's father.

"She'll bring nothing with her," said George slowly.

"I shouldn't be offering her to you if she did," said her father. He spoke good-humouredly. There had come to him a sudden blessed respite from pain.

"All right," said George, "I'll take her."

"Not till I'm gone, mind," said Euphemia's father.

George's eyes turned to the door again.

"All right," he said.

III

EUPHEMIA sat in the arm-chair by the kitchen fire, staring blankly in front of her. She could not believe it . . . Dead? Why, it was only yesterday evening that he had played backgammon with George and taunted her so unmercifully about her age. He had seemed just the same as usual when she went in to settle him for the night at ten o'clock. Quiet and drowsy, perhaps, but he was often quiet and drowsy after a hard game with George.

When she had opened the door this morning to take in his breakfast, she had at first thought he was asleep, though it was unusual for him to sleep so late. She had closed the door silently and taken his breakfast downstairs again. Ten minutes later she had crept back up the stairs and opened the door to see if he was awake. He was still lying there motionless, his head turned away from her on the pillow. Something in the rigidity of his pose arrested her. She went up to the bed and touched his shoulder. The icy chill of it through his nightshirt set her heart racing. Tentatively she placed her hand against his cheek, then withdrew it as if it had been stung. She went downstairs, put on her hat and coat, and set off to the doctor's. In ten minutes the whole village had heard of the old man's death, and the cottage was besieged by visitors. Ostensibly they came to offer condolences; in reality they came to hear the detailed story of Euphemia's father's last hours and to see his dead body. Euphemia was unexpectedly firm. Her father had refused to see his neighbours in his life. He must be protected from them in his death. They were naturally annoyed at being thus deprived of what they looked upon as their natural privilege. Mrs. Medham, of Rose Cottage, who had

brought a meat pie as the excuse of her visit ("Times like this is no times for shopping"), surreptitiously took it away with her again when she found that she was not to be allowed to see the "corse."

The gentleness and timidity with which Euphemia exercised her firmness made it additionally insulting in the eyes of her neighbours.

She stood, large and unwieldy, at the bottom of the staircase, barring their way, speaking in her soft, hesitating voice.

"No . . . it's kind of you, but he wouldn't have liked it. He never cared for visitors, you know. . . I'm sorry, but he was always one to keep himself to himself."

The presence of these chattering women in the little kitchen that was usually so silent and empty, filled her with a strange panic. Her eyes were bright and wary, like the eyes of a hunted animal.

She answered their questions breathlessly.

"No. . . Yes, he was quite all right last night. . . No, he didn't seem worse. . . I don't remember what was the last thing he said to me. It was nothing important. . . He had just his ordinary supper . . . a glass of hot milk. . . No, he never had more than that. . . No, I'm sorry I can't let you go up."

They went away at last, reluctant and outraged.

"I shouldn't be surprised," said Mrs. Medham mysteriously, "if there was *something* in that glass of milk besides milk. People don't die sudden like that for no reason."

"Well, it's a queer thing she's so scared of anyone seein' the corse," agreed Mrs. Bruce, of the general shop.

But, in view of the fact that her father's death left Euphemia penniless, they regretfully abandoned their theories of foul play.

Left alone in the kitchen, Euphemia sat down in the basket chair by the fireplace. She sat stiff and tense, ready to spring to her feet at the familiar summons from upstairs. Some uncanny instinct always seemed to warn the old man when she was trying to snatch a moment's rest in this chair. . . The basketwork creaked suddenly, and she

leapt up, thinking that it was the sound of her father's stick banging on the bedroom floor. Then she sank back into the chair again, the beating of her heart like hammer strokes in her side.

Her chief sensation was one of bewilderment. She had been jerked out of her narrow groove of servitude too suddenly and too violently. It was as if there were a thick mist all about her. She could see nothing. . . . She literally could not believe that he was dead. So isolated from the rest of the world had they been in their dual rôles of drudge and tyrant that it seemed to her physically impossible for him to have gone away and left her behind. If he were dead, then she must be dead too. The young girl who had been part of Euphemia had fled in terror, leaving only the drudge—stunned, bewildered, panic-stricken.

"He's dead," she said aloud. "He's dead."

It occurred to her that she ought to be weeping, as she had seen women weep in the village when their parents or husbands died. The knowledge that she felt no grief shocked her.

"I didn't love him," she said aloud, as if making a distressing discovery. "That was wrong of me. I ought to have loved him."

With an effort she summoned again the memory of that bitter pain-wracked face, met again in imagination the malicious smile, and vainly tried to feel some pang of love and regret. It seemed to her imperative that she should love him even now, late as it was. But she couldn't. She could only feel for him what she had always felt—a dislike neutralised by pity to indifference. As if to justify herself she said:

"He plagued mother cruel," then, for the pictured eyes seemed to glint malevolently in the anticipatory joy of fault-finding, she corrected herself hastily, "cruelly."

There came the sound of three brisk raps, and she started towards the staircase with a curious sense of relief. It was all right. This strange, bewildering thing had not happened. She had not been jerked sharply up against

the unknown. Those three knocks had reduced life again to the only terms on which she knew how to deal with it. At the foot of the staircase she stopped, and her heart again began to beat unevenly. . . He was dead. . . That was a fact. Nothing could undo it. The knocks had come from the door. She went very slowly across the room, moving a strand of hair from her eyes, and after wiping her hands on her apron with quick nervous movements opened the door. A small, stout woman stepped into the kitchen with a quick, business-like tread and laid a parcel on the red-and-blue check table-cloth.

"I've done the best I could for you, my dear," she said briskly.

Euphemia remembered. . .

It seemed weeks ago, months ago, that Mrs. Cibber—always the first to arrive on the scene of a "bereavement"—had come to the cottage with offers to "see about the black." The doctor had just gone, and Euphemia was standing, dazed and stunned, in the middle of the little kitchen. She had taken no more heed of Mrs. Cibber, with her eager, gloating questions, than if she had been a wasp buzzing about the room. She had agreed automatically to everything she said, waiting only for the moment when she should go away and leave her in peace. She had gone away at last, but immediately the other neighbours had arrived. They too had gone, and now, after ten minutes' solitude, Euphemia was vaguely relieved to see Mrs. Cibber in the kitchen again. She gazed in helpless bewilderment, however, at the black garments that Mrs. Cibber was drawing out of the paper parcel.

In Mrs. Cibber's manner was the delicately blended mixture of cheerfulness and gloom that she considered appropriate to the occasion. The cheerfulness was intended to brace the mourner, the gloom was a tribute to the dead body upstairs. Attendance at the scenes of many bereavements had enabled Mrs. Cibber to bring this manner to a fine perfection. She spoke in whispers, but the whispers were bright and encouraging; she walked on tiptoe, but smiled—a subdued smile—as she walked.

"I went into Felton, and I got a coat and skirt very reasonable at thirty-five shillings, and a silk blouse at ten and eleven, and a handkerchief for the funeral with a black edge. Only sixpence, and over an inch of black all round. I chose a hat for you, too, but they're sending it tomorrow. You won't need it till the funeral, so there's no hurry. The hat was seven and eleven. A real stylish one." She caught sight of her reflection in the small square mirror on the wall and, feeling the self-congratulatory smile to be over-bright, hastily toned it down, adding with a sigh, "I'm sure you've no heart for style, my dear, just now. But still," the smile broke out again, "we've all got to make the best of things, and we must be thankful our time's not come yet."

Euphemia was thinking: I didn't know she was buying black things for me. I remember her coming and talking, but I never realised she was going to buy black clothes for me. Suppose that other people said they'd do it, too, and I never took it in. . . .

She had a sudden vision of neighbour after neighbour arriving with large parcels, of the kitchen table covered with innumerable black coats and skirts, and black silk blouses, and stylish seven-and-eleven-penny hats. She suppressed a hysterical desire to laugh.

"Now let's try them on," whispered Mrs. Cibber eagerly.

There was something disarmingly innocent in Mrs. Cibber's obvious relish of the situation. Her love of scenes of "bereavement" was a child's love of pageant and play-acting.

"Come up to your bedroom, dear," she went on in her piercing whisper, "I think they'll look a treat."

Euphemia had stiffened at the suggestion of going to her bedroom.

"No," she said breathlessly, "I don't want to go there."

The bedroom, of course, was not hers. It belonged to the girl who had fled that morning when she found the dead body of her father. She felt that she could not go to that room, so full of dreams and fancies and innocent little imaginings, to try on these black garments.

"I understand, my dear," said Mrs. Cibber in a pleased

whisper. The poor thing couldn't bear the thought of passing the room where the corpse lay, of course. Quite satisfactory and as it should be. Mrs. Cibber liked people to react to situations correctly.

"It's all right, love," she whispered reassuringly, "we'll try them on down here."

She glanced at the two tiny windows, and a look of horror came into her face.

"Have them blinds not been down at all?" she said, forgetting even to whisper.

"No," said Euphemia.

"I never heard of such a thing," said Mrs. Cibber, deeply stirred, as she hastily drew down the tiny blinds with the edgings of crotchet work that Euphemia's mother had made. The little kitchen was plunged into gloom, lit only by the two golden squares. In the middle of one of the golden squares a pot of geraniums flaunted itself, defying Mrs. Cibber.

"That's dreadful, that is," went on Mrs. Cibber severely. "Half the day gone and the blinds not down. Whatever will folks *think*? . . . I know you're not to blame, love," she went on, relenting. "A sudden bereavement like this puts everything out of one's head, but the blinds ought to be down first thing."

Remembering that Euphemia had no one else to "lose," she checked the "Don't forget that next time," that rose to her lips, and began to shake out the coat and skirt.

Euphemia slipped off her dress and stood in her home-made petticoat and bodice. Her bare arms and bosom were unexpectedly impressive, and Mrs. Cibber murmured doubtfully:

"You don't take outsize, do you, love? . . . No, I think they'll be all right. . . The blouse first. . ."

"I *think* they're all right," she said at last uncertainly, as she stepped back to survey the final effect. The blouse and coat pulled in tight creases across the large chest, the skirt was strained unbecomingly over the hips.

"You can move the buttons on the blouse and coat and the hooks on the skirt," she went on. "I think that's all

they need," and added with rising cheerfulness, "and the hat's really stylish when it comes. . . Just have a look at yourself, love."

Euphemia glanced at her reflection, receiving as usual an unpleasant shock at the sight of the big, sallow woman who was so unexpectedly herself. The fit of the coat and blouse did not strike her as bad. All her clothes pulled across her chest and hips in tight creases like that.

"Two pounds, fourteen and fourpence altogether, love," said Mrs. Cibber. "I paid cash for them."

Euphemia went to the drawer in the dresser where she kept her worn leather purse. There were four pounds in it. As she took out two pounds, fourteen and fourpence, and gave it to Mrs. Cibber, it struck her suddenly with a dull surprise that one pound five and eightpence was all she possessed in the world.

Mrs. Cibber thanked her and looked around. The deep black of Euphemia's apparel and the drawn blinds were satisfactory. The lack of emotion was less so. There had not been a funeral in the village for the last ten years whose female chief mourners had not sobbed on Mrs. Cibber's bosom.

She put her arms about Euphemia's broad shoulders and said persuasively, "Now have a good cry, love."

But Euphemia drew away sharply. So aloof from her kind had she lived that the contact of the little woman's bosom and the clasp of her warm clinging arms filled her with terror.

"No!" she gasped, "No!"

"It'll do you good," Mrs. Cibber assured her.

"No," said Euphemia again. "I don't want to cry. I—I didn't love him."

Mrs. Cibber for a moment felt as nonplussed as an actress who is given the wrong cue. Then her face cleared, and again she patted Euphemia's broad shoulder.

"It's turned you light-headed, love," she said. "I've heard of that happening. . . You want a good rest, that's what you want. Sit down here and close your eyes and try to get a bit of sleep. I'll settle you nicely."

Euphemia patiently allowed herself to be "settled" in the basket chair.

"Now, you'll let me get you a cup of tea?" went on Mrs. Cibber.

"No, thank you," said Euphemia very firmly.

She thought hopefully that, if she could not get her a cup of tea, there would be nothing for Mrs. Cibber to do but go home. Mrs. Cibber evidently shared her opinion. She turned a slow, appraising glance from the figure in the arm-chair in its deep mourning to the drawn blinds. Yes, on the whole, all possible savour had for the present been extracted from the situation. She had even slipped upstairs to look at the dead man early that morning, while Euphemia was engaged in taking the milk from the milkman at the door. She was hugging jealously to her heart the memory of the white, sunken, bitter face. It would satisfy and solace her for months. Her last sustaining memory had been that of Betty Orchard, crying in church the Sunday after her husband left her. That memory, however, was growing dim, and she was ready for another to take its place. She had been born with a hunger for romance, and with such stale food she had learned to satisfy it.

She put on her shabby hat and coat and opened the cottage door. Standing in the doorway, she gave her final directions.

"Now keep them black things on all the time," she said. "Put an overall on for the housework, but slip it off when you go to the door. It wouldn't do for folks to catch you in colours. . . And, mind you, the blinds not up an inch till after the funeral. You understand, love, don't you?"

She felt the anxiety of a producer over an unreliable actress.

"I'll be round tomorrow morning to see how you're getting on. Good-bye, love."

"Good-bye," said Euphemia dully.

When she had gone, Euphemia sat upright and motionless in the basket chair. The only sound in the darkened room was the measured ticking of the clock on the mantel-

piece—a loud and, as it seemed to Euphemia, a maliciously triumphant ticking. It grew louder, more malicious, more triumphant, till suddenly it seemed to be her father's cackling laughter coming from the room upstairs. She started to her feet, then sat down again, the beating of her heart drowning the sound of the clock. Gradually the beating of her heart died down, and again the ticking of the clock filled the room. Tick-tock-tick-tock. . . She glanced up at it. It was only half-past two. She had to sit there in the darkness all afternoon, all evening, all tomorrow, and all the next day. A convulsive shudder seized her. It was like a nightmare. She dared not even look forward. She was dazed and stunned. Hour after hour, day after day, week after week, for years an unchanging routine had repeated itself. It was the only life she knew. It was impossible that it should have come to an end and she go on living. . .

The sound of a knock at the door made her start up again. Before she had reached the foot of the stairs, however, the door opened, and George Earnshaw entered. He closed the door slowly behind him and stood smiling at her across the darkened room.

His familiar presence calmed her panic. So great was her relief that she felt almost affectionate towards him. He was a fixed point in her tottering world. The earth had not dropped away altogether beneath her feet, the only life she knew how to deal with had not come utterly to an end, if he was still there.

She smiled unsteadily.

"You gave me a start," she said breathlessly. "The knocking made me think . . ."

"I waited till the others had gone," he said.

"You'd like to go up and see him?" She moved away from the bottom of the staircase as she spoke.

George, of course, had a right to see him. George had come every night to play backgammon with him. He would not have minded George's seeing him.

"No, it's you I came to see," said George slowly. "Sit down, and let's have a talk."

He sat on the stiff wooden chair in front of the window.

"She said I had to keep the blinds down," she explained, "and she bought me these clothes."

His gaze travelled up and down her figure. She had dragged both skirt and blouse over her head, and loosened strands of her thick brown hair hung about her face, giving her a dishevelled look. Her sudden terror at the sound of his knocking had sent the blood flaming into her cheeks. The thin silk of her blouse pulled tightly over her large, soft breasts.

His gaze flickered up and down her, and the tip of his tongue ran along the edges of his lip.

"Your father and me was talking about you just before he died," he said. "He told me what he wanted you to do case he died."

He paused, but she said nothing, only sat there tense, and, except for the rising and falling of her breast, motionless, her brown eyes fixed on him.

"He told me he wanted you to wed me, Euphemia, and I'm willing for it myself."

His eyes shifted away from hers as he spoke, to fix themselves again on her tightly prisoned breasts.

The tenseness and rigidity had suddenly left her. It was as if all that day she had been waiting for her father to tell her what to do, and his message had come at last. The mist had cleared, the precipice before her feet had turned into a path.

He watched her anxiously.

"You've no money, you know, 'Phemia," he said. "His annuity's gone with him."

She gazed dreamily into the distance, seeing the annuity—a tall, thin figure with a red seal for face, rolled up bank notes for legs and arms, its waist outlined in red tape—walking hand in hand with father through dim shadowy regions. Father could walk now, of course. His nightgown fluttered about his bare legs, and he grumbled incessantly at his companion. Then she blinked her eyes, shocked by the irreverence of the picture.

"Where *has* he gone?" she said suddenly.

George coughed deprecatingly.

"Well," he replied vaguely, "we're all in need of salvation," adding still more vaguely, "some more than others," then urgently, "you've not given your answer yet, 'Phemia."

"What about?"

"Will you wed me same as your father left word? You'd never get work, 'Phemia. Not starting at your age. Your age is against you. They wouldn't want a woman of your age starting at the bottom, and you can't get higher places without experience. It was your father's dyin' wish that you should wed me."

"Yes, I'll wed you, George," she said. "It'll be just goin' next door, won't it?" She glanced around her. "What about the furniture?"

"We'll pick out the best pieces and sell the rest," said George.

He went about the room, pretending to examine the furniture, but watching her furtively. She sat, staring dazedly in front of her again, as if she had forgotten him. She was thinking: He isn't good enough for Heaven, and he isn't bad enough for hell. Where is he? She remembered a picture she had once seen of a dark, gloomy place with skulls, a broken crown, and tombstones. She saw her father creeping along in it, angry, frightened, forlorn. Or perhaps he was standing invisible in this very room, jeering at her in her new blouse and skirt (he always jeered at her when she wore new clothes). She tried to imagine him in robes or even in an ordinary suit, but she had never seen him in anything but his short nightshirts, and she could not picture him otherwise.

George was standing on the hearthrug near her, looking down at her.

"We needn't wait long," he said.

"What for?" said Euphemia.

"For our wedding."

"No . . . no, of course not."

"People will understand."

"Yes," she agreed.

Again there was silence. Tiny pinpricks of sweat stood out on his forehead.

"I'll say good-bye," he said. "And I'd better not come in much now, or people'll talk. I'll make arrangements for the banns to go up next Sunday."

"Yes," she said absently.

She stood up and held out her hand.

"Good-bye," she said.

With a desperate nervous movement he plunged towards her and laid his lips upon hers. His trembling hands held her shoulders, then slid down uncontrollably to finger the soft mounds of her breasts. She stiffened, and he released her precipitately, smiling nervously and breathing in quick noisy gasps.

"Good-bye, then," he said. "I'll see the vicar tonight."

When he had gone, she took out her handkerchief and carefully wiped her lips where his had touched them.

She felt no resentment. Many of the duties connected with the nursing of her father had been personally distasteful to her. Without considering their exact nature, she took for granted that her new life, too, would contain unpleasant duties. At any rate, the mist had cleared. There was something for her to do, somewhere for her to go. Life had not come utterly to an end.

She sat, large and motionless and silent, her brown eyes fixed unseeingly on the wall in front of her. The next-door cottage was just the same size as this. It would be quite easy to work. She would grow vegetables in the garden. She would do the washing on Monday, the bedroom on Tuesday, the sitting-room on Thursday, and the kitchen on Friday. She would polish the furniture well every week. She would try some of the recipes in her cookery book that she had always longed to try.

She concentrated her thoughts determinedly on these plans, holding them like blinkers to her eyes, so that she should not see, on one side, father wandering desolately in shadowy places in his abbreviated nightshirt, and, on the other, George, his pale face glistening with sweat as his hands slid down from her shoulders to finger her breasts. . . .

IV

THE whole village attended the funeral, not from any respect or affection for the dead man, but merely because it happened to be the only entertainment that the day offered. Mrs. Cibber sat by Euphemia, holding a bottle of sal volatile and waiting eagerly for her to break down. But Euphemia stared in front of her, solid and composed, throughout the service. She was feeling dully surprised at the number of people who had come to the church, and more than a little guilty. Father would not have liked it. He would have been furious with her for letting them come. He would have turned on them, snarling savagely, and they would have run helter-skelter out of the church, pushing each other in the narrow little doorway. . . .

She looked at the coffin, fascinated, half expecting to see father rise from it in his fluttering nightshirt and drive all these people off. She glanced around and realised with a shock that the gaze of the entire congregation was fixed on her, critical, disappointed, faintly hostile. Not once had she applied to her eyes the black-bordered handkerchief, not once had she had recourse to the sal volatile that Mrs. Cibber held in conspicuous readiness. Her large shoulders had not even quivered. . . . They felt towards her as an audience would feel towards an actress who was muffing her part.

But it was George whom she noticed particularly. He was sitting in the seat just behind her, smiling his uneasy, quivering smile, and even when she was not turning round she felt his eyes upon her. They

seemed to creep over her, fingering her, so that her nerves contracted and recoiled as if at some physical touch.

She was at the graveside now. Mrs. Cibber was still standing next to her, suggestively flourishing the bottle of sal volatile. The gaze of the village was still upon her, giving her, as it were, one last chance to distinguish herself in her rôle.

She still stared fixedly in front of her, no sign of emotion upon her heavy face.

They were streaming away from the grave now. The vicar was speaking to her, giving her condolences and congratulations in the same breath.

"A terrible loss. . . . I quite agree that there's nothing to wait for . . . you did your duty to him splendidly. You've nothing to reproach yourself with. . . . I hope you'll be very, very happy in your married life."

The vicar, who was a romanticist, saw the case of Euphemia and George as a case of love long sacrificed to duty but at last rewarded.

"I shall have the greatest pleasure in performing the ceremony," he went on, "and I'm sure" (he said this less certainly) "that no one would rejoice at your happiness more than your father."

Looking at his thin worn face, Euphemia felt an absurd longing to go home and cook him a meal of pork and sage and onions and brussel sprouts and baked potatoes. She was sure that his housekeeper starved him.

"Thank you, sir," she said.

"Good-bye, then, for the present, and I hope that you will come to me if you need any help or advice."

His clothes hung on him as if he were a clothes prop. He wanted feeding up—porridge and beefsteak for breakfast, and a good hot meal of meat and vegetables at night as well as at midday. She itched to feed him up. . . .

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

She walked along the road with Mrs. Cibber, wondering how to get rid of her. Silently she practised saying:

"I'm sorry I can't ask you in, Mrs. Cibber, but I want to start turning out father's bedroom."

And, though she shrank from the idea, she would actually turn it out, so that she should not have told a lie. She need not, however, have worried about Mrs. Cibber. Mrs. Cibber had finished with her. She had fulfilled her function as far as Mrs. Cibber was concerned. In that lady's eyes the glamour departed from the mourner immediately after the funeral service. In any case, this particular mourner had been eminently unsatisfactory, and hardly worth the pains that Mrs. Cibber had bestowed upon her. No, Mrs. Cibber was hot foot already upon another scent. Her quarry was young Mrs. Larch of Vine Cottage. Mrs. Larch had stood just opposite her in the churchyard, and certain signs had suggested to Mrs. Cibber that Mrs. Larch was "expecting" again. Mrs. Cibber would know no peace till she had discovered whether this were so or not. She said good-bye absently to Euphemia at the cross-roads, and set off in the direction of Vine Cottage.

Euphemia walked on quickly to the cottage. She relaxed her pace on seeing that George was waiting for her at the gate.

His furtive smile crept out to meet her.

"It's getting late," he said, "I'd better not come in just now. I don't want to set folks talkin'. Tomorrow morning I'll come round an' talk things over."

George imputed his own salacious imaginings to the world in general and had always been nervously careful of his reputation.

She answered him absently and walked quickly up to the cottage door. It had suddenly occurred to her that she might pull up the blinds now, and she longed to do it. During these last two days she had come to hate the little darkened room. She closed the door, and, without stopping to take off her black cotton gloves, pulled up first one blind then the other. The little kitchen was flooded with bright sunshine. She drew a deep breath and stood, stretching luxuriously, lifting her arms above her head. The cheap black coat and skirt looked coarse and dusty

in the bright light. The "stylish" hat was a terrible affair—over-trimmed and too small for her head. Then she relaxed and went slowly upstairs. Outside her father's room she stood for a moment, irresolute. She wanted to open the door to see whether he was lying there on the bed as usual, scowling savagely, waiting for her . . . but she couldn't. She turned to her own bedroom and entered it reluctantly, timidly, as though she were a stranger. Since the morning of her father's death the room had mysteriously changed. All the romance and youth and adventure that had invested it had fled. It had become just a small and very inconvenient bedroom, inhabited by a middle-aged woman. There were no traces in it of the sixteen-year-old girl, except the flounced muslin dressing-table cover with its foolish blue bows.

Euphemia took off her hat and replaced it in the cardboard hat-box, covering it with tissue paper. She had no doubts at all about the hat, except a doubt whether so much stylishness was necessary. But, as Mrs. Cibber had pointed out, it was "good value," and, of course, with the addition of a few coloured flowers and ribbons, would do for the wedding.

She took off her coat, brushed it, and hung it on the hook behind the door. Then she sat down on the bed to consider her position. She would be married to George in three weeks' time. There was a lot to do before then. She must give this house a good clean-down before she left it. And she must start on George's. That woman who came in to "do" for him was a careless slut. Used a feather brush for dusting. . . The feeling of dazed depression that she was trying to ignore grew heavier. Perhaps it was the darkened room. Of course, she could pull up this blind, too, now. She pulled it up, and the bright sunshine flooded every corner. She stood revelling in it. Then her lips parted, her eyes grew bright, her breath began to come and go quickly. Her dazedness and bewilderment had vanished. What a fool, what a *fool* she had been! Of *course* she could not marry George. Marry George when the whole world lay before her! She thought of his furtive

smile, his tongue licking the edges of his lips, his hot eyes that "pawed" her—and gave a short laugh of contempt. . . She had nothing to do with him, nothing. An eager exultation possessed her. She would go to London, get work, and live, *live*, LIVE! The romantic young girl had returned just in time.

V

THE young girl had, in fact, taken complete possession of Euphemia. She was singing gaily as she packed the battered rush hamper that had belonged to her mother. At last life was beginning. . . How much did it cost to go to London? She went downstairs to look at the shabby leather purse that was kept in the dresser drawer. She felt young and slim and eager, and subconsciously the size of her body as it plunged down the narrow stairway disconcerted her. It seemed to take up so much more room than she expected it to take. Its movements were exasperatingly awkward and clumsy.

She opened the purse with trembling fingers. . . . Ten shillings. . . . She would need more than that. She glanced round the cheerful kitchen with its blue-and-white check curtains and table-cloth and the gay geranium on the window-sill, then went into the stuffy, seldom-used parlour beyond it. Most of the furniture here had originally belonged to her grandmother. Her mother had inherited it a year after they moved into the cottage and had taken a pathetic pride in arranging the little room. She had no time to sit in it, and visitors were forbidden, but the thought of it had always been a secret comfort to her. It was, as it were, the badge of her respectability-- a "nice" room with "good" furniture.

Euphemia looked round it, frowning. The ladder-back chairs . . . the china on the mantelpiece . . . the sampler on the wall . . . the fire-screen . . . the little cabinet . . . the corner cupboard. They were all old. People paid money for old things.

She went quickly upstairs again, put on her hat and coat, and set off to catch the 'bus into Market Felton.

The second-hand furniture dealer—a small, stout man with a bald head and permanently aggrieved expression—glanced curiously at the middle-aged woman with the unspeakable hat and eager persistence.

"But you *must*," she was saying, "tomorrow won't do—I want the money today."

Her eagerness was ridiculous and seemed strangely to belong to someone quite different.

Indeed, whenever he turned away from her he seemed to see someone young and vital and inexperienced, so that it gave him a shock when he turned to her again and saw the heavy, middle-aged face and the dreadful hat with its imitation jet ornaments and nodding ears of black wheat.

"I'm sorry," he said in a tone of finality. "I've no one to send. I'm short-handed today. I'll send someone tomorrow."

"Come yourself," she urged.

"I've told you already I can't," he snapped. "What's going to happen to the shop while I'm away?"

"You'll only be away about an hour. Surely you often get an hour without anyone coming into the shop."

She was like a girl, refusing to see the question from any point of view but her own, pestering him. . . His gaze grew more hostile.

"Yes, and I might miss a customer for something costing fifty pounds," he said.

"What have you got here worth fifty pounds?" she said.

He ignored the question.

"If they come and find you out, they can come again tomorrow," she went on.

"They won't," he said.

"Yes, they will. When they find you're out, it will make them all the more anxious to buy it, and they'll come tomorrow and pay more for it."

"They won't come tomorrow."

"They can come later this evening, then. You'll be back

by five. You can put a notice on the door, 'Back at five o'clock.'"

"I'm not coming."

"Why not?"

He made no answer, and began to move about his shop, sorting and arranging his things as if she were not there.

"You'd better bring about twenty pounds," she said, "because I've got twenty pounds worth of furniture, and I want the money today."

Suddenly he gave up the struggle. There was no other possible way of getting rid of her. If he did not go, she would stand there tormenting him all night, talking like a young girl and looking like an old woman in her ridiculous hat. He was sick of her. The only thing to do was to go with her and get it over.

"I expect you've not got four shillings worth," he muttered fiercely, as he took a sheet of notepaper and wrote on it in large block letters,

"BACK AT FIVE O'CLOCK."

Then he slipped some notes from the till into his pocket, took his hat from a peg, and set out with her down the street to the place where the 'bus started.

He stood in the middle of the little parlour, looking round him with eyes that were keen and appraising beneath their sulkiness.

"Well, will you give me twenty pounds for everything?" she demanded. "Everything in the house as it stands?"

"It's not worth ten," he snapped.

The corner cupboard alone was worth ten pounds and the ladder-back chairs another ten, but she was obviously unaware of that.

"All right," she said, "don't have it, then."

"After all the trouble I've had coming out here?"

"I'll pay your 'bus fare."

"I'll give you fifteen."

"I want twenty."

She had set her heart on the exact sum. She had decided that twenty pounds would take her to London and

keep her till she had found a post. She did not want more, but she did not want less.

"I've told you I couldn't get ten pounds for the whole lot together."

"Well, then, I'll go to some other dealer. There's Lane. He'd give me twenty."

He threw her a malevolent glance. Cocksure of herself like a girl. Confident. Care-free. And looking such a guy. She couldn't have any idea what a guy she looked, or she wouldn't behave like this. He felt an almost uncontrollable impulse to tell her what a guy she looked, to drag her to the mirror and *show* her.

"All right," he muttered. "Twenty. Though there isn't a stick in the place worth more than sixpence."

"I want it now. At once."

"I can't pay it you now. I'll give it you tomorrow."

"I don't want it tomorrow. I want it now. At once. I'm going to London tonight."

"Yes, and who'll know you paid me? They'll say I just pinched the stuff."

"I'll sign a receipt, of course. I can't wait till tomorrow. It might be gone tomorrow."

By "it" she meant this zest for life that filled every fibre of her being, this strange, sustaining exhilaration that made her feel as if she had been dipped in a revivifying stream.

He hovered irresolutely in the doorway. Nothing would have pleased him more than to have turned on his heel contemptuously and left her. But he did not want Lane to get that corner cupboard or those ladder-back chairs.

"Where can I make out a receipt?" he muttered sulkily.

She led him into the kitchen, drew a chair up to the table for him, and took down pen and ink from an upper shelf of the dresser.

He made out a hurried inventory ("Junk, most of it," he muttered fiercely) and drew a twenty-pound note from his case. She signed her name over the twopenny stamp. There was unexpectedly both style and character in her handwriting. He pocketed the receipt, then stood scowling at her.

"When can I fetch the stuff?" he said.

She took a key from one of the dresser shelves and handed it to him.

"Any time," she said. "I'm going now. Good evening."

"Good evening," he said, and set off down the village street to the 'bus stage. "Old guy," he muttered as he walked. The courage and hope and youthfulness that emanated from her seemed to him vaguely obscene. He hated youth even in young people, though in them at least he recognised its inevitability and resigned himself to it. But youth in this large, elderly woman outraged him. She should have been downtrodden and morose and suspicious and hopeless. He would not have minded then how disagreeable she had been. It was this care-free arrogance of youth in her that infuriated him so. He was trembling with anger at the memory of it as he reached the 'bus stage.

In the cottage Euphemia was writing a note at the kitchen table.

DEAR GEORGE I am sorry that I cannot marry you after all. I am going to London to earn my living.

Yours sincerely,

EUPHEMIA TRACY.

She fastened the envelope, addressed it, and propped it up against the clock on the mantelpiece. Then she went to her bedroom to finish packing. Nearly everything was in the battered rush hamper now—her stout cambric, home-made underclothes, her high-necked calico night-dresses, her thick often-soled shoes, her befrilled home-made dresses, her black ribbed woollen stockings, her large square cotton handkerchiefs, her little collection of books. She had wrapped her sponge and tooth and nail brushes in a piece of oil cloth that was left over from covering the dresser. There was no room for the brown serge coat that she had worn for six years or for the red flannel dressing-gown that had been her mother's, so she made them up into a large newspaper parcel, firmly tied with string. Her mackintosh and umbrella, of course, she would carry. She

would take her string shopping-bag to hold some bread and cheese for the journey, her purse, and a few small oddments that she had not been able to pack into the rush hamper or the newspaper parcel.

When finally she set off towards the 'bus stage, the string shopping-bag was full to bursting. She had put into it a bundle of dusters, several tins of boot blacking, an egg beater, a ball of string, a large red-and-black check over-all, a box of notepaper, a shoehorn, a toasting-fork, a faded photograph of her mother in a celluloid frame, an alarum clock, and, perched precariously on the top, the plant pot with the geranium that had stood on the kitchen window-sill.

She walked briskly, carrying the rush hamper by its worn strap in one hand, the newspaper parcel by its string in the other, the umbrella and mackintosh on one arm, and the string bag on the other. The loud metallic ticking of the alarum clock sounded merrily through its covering of dusters and over-all, as if it, too, exulted in her freedom.

She was only just in time for the 'bus. The conductor greeted her with a cheerful, "Forgot the bird-cage, missis?" and she laughed as she sank panting into her seat.

It was the conductor who pointed out George to her, after the 'bus had started.

"Seems in a hurry," he said. "Friend of yours?"

She turned and saw George running along the road after the 'bus. His face was at last stripped of its smile. His eyes were full of panic and anger and entreaty. Euphemia's flight had not been unobserved, and it was to George, of course, that the witnesses had taken their story. Baffled fury gleamed from his pale blue eyes as he ran. He wanted Euphemia. He wanted her to cook his meals and keep his house clean, he wanted her to minister to his comfort and his vanity. He thought of the way the cheap black silk blouse pulled over her large soft breasts. She had cheated him of something. He was frightened of young girls, and he did not want a middle-aged woman. Euphemia somehow had not seemed a middle-aged woman despite her forty years and her heavy face and figure. . . The thought

of her had set his pulses racing ever since that night when she had turned to face him on the dark stairs and his hand had come in contact with the soft warm flesh of her arm. And now she was running away. . . His heart was full of seething anger against her. He had forgotten everything else in the world.

"Don't stop," said Euphemia to the conductor.

"Not likely," said the conductor.

He was young and impudent and devil-may-care with his peaked cap tilted at a dandyish angle over his ear and a crocus in his buttonhole. "I start at my right time, and, if once I begin stoppin' for 'em, I'll never get off at all. What's he think he's doing anyway? He's batty, that's what he is."

Watching him, still running after the 'bus but falling farther and farther behind, Euphemia felt surprised that she had never noticed before how ugly he was. Ugly and insignificant. She was glad that she had seen his mouth without its smile. There was something mean about it. And yet it thrilled her to be pursued by him. It took away the furtiveness of her flight, making it rich and colourful and romantic. Suddenly he stopped running and stood, grey and panting, in the middle of the road, shaking his fist and screaming, "Blast you, you - —" in a shrill falsetto.

The conductor turned to Euphemia with his perky smile.

"There's langwidge for you," he said.

They both laughed. George began to walk slowly back to the village, turning every now and then to shake his fist again at the retreating 'bus.

The conductor took off his cap and wiped his brow.

"Ot, ain't it?" he said.

"Why don't you sit down?" said Euphemia.

"Well, as there's only you, I don't see why I shouldn't," he said.

So he sat down, and, before they reached Market Felton, he had told her all about his mother and his father and the girl he was going to marry.

"I don't say that she's not a girl who wants fun and a

good time," he said, "but she's different from most 'cause she knows where to get it. Dances an' pictures is all very well in their way, but they're not real fun. We've both got the sort of homes where you have a real good time just all being together, and that's the sort we're going to have when we set up house. It's no use goin' out for fun. If you can't get it at home, you can't get it anywhere. That's my opinion, anyway. You should see us all together sometimes of a Saturday night. My old man singin' comic songs fit to make you cry with laughin'. An' I've got a brother that'd make an elephant laugh just with lookin' at him. An' my sisters! Jolliest girls I ever set eyes on. 'Cept my girl, of course. An', with us all growin' up together, we've got a lot of jokes that sound batty to anyone outside, but that set us off laughin' fit to split our sides. An' her family's just the same. That's what first sort of made us take to each other. A nice little house an' jolly kids an' all having fun together—that's what *we're* going to have same as our fathers and mothers had. People who think there's anything in marriage without kids are balmy."

What Euphemia longed to do was to take off a diamond brooch and hand it to him, saying, "Give this to your girl for me." She even glanced down at her dress to see if miraculously a diamond brooch had appeared on it in response to her wish. But, of course, there was no diamond brooch—only a mother-of-pearl brooch that had cost one and six and that was cracked across the middle. She could not possibly give him that. She glanced hopefully at her string bag, but a cursory examination revealed nothing there either that she could give to him for his girl. A geranium in a pot would be embarrassing, and such things as egg beaters and toasting-forks and shoehorns, though useful, would hardly comprise a gesture.

So, instead, she smiled at him and said earnestly:

"I hope you'll be very happy. I *know* you'll be very happy. Give her my love, will you?"

"You bet," he said with a confident tilt of his head.

The bus had come to its halting-place at Market Felton station, and she was still its only passenger. He collected

her traps for her, hung the mackintosh and monumental umbrella on her arm, and helped her to alight. He watched her as she walked into the station entrance—bulky and middle-aged in the badly fitting black coat that pulled across the shoulders, the impossible hat, now slightly awry, the patched black leather shoes. . . While he was talking to her, it had seemed to him that he was talking to someone of his own generation.

"Blimy!" he said, with a puzzled frown that faded into his inevitable grin, "Fancy me talkin' all that stuff to 'er!"

Euphemia was laying a twenty-pound note on the booking-clerk's desk and demanding a ticket to London.

"No, I've no less," she said carelessly in answer to the booking-clerk's exasperated question.

It was one of the proudest moments of her life.

Then she sat on the station seat, clutching her bundles, and staring dreamily in front of her. So lost in dreams was she that she did not see the train come in and would have missed it if the porter had not roused her with a shout and pushed her into an empty carriage throwing her packages after her just in time. She straightened her hat (a long overdue proceeding) and picked up the geranium pot, mercifully uninjured, from the floor, carefully replacing it at the top of the string bag.

Then she settled down in a corner by the window. It was the second time in her life that she had been in a train (the first time had been when she was a few months old and had paid a visit to her grandmother), and for a few moments she abandoned herself to the sheer delight of motion and the childish pleasure of watching the countryside flash by the window.

Then her mind went back again to George's pursuit of her. Taken on the whole, the episode was lacking in dignity. She retouched it carefully, standing back from it every now and then like an artist considering the effect of his picture. She took from George his insignificance and furtiveness and meanness. She made him young, handsome, upright, with a mouth that did not smile and eyes that did not "paw." Why had she run away from him? George's wife,

whom both of them believed dead, had come back, and she, Euphemia, had fled in order not to tempt George to break his marriage vows. She had fled in a luxurious motor-car (one of the sort that occasionally brought Americans to the village—not often, because the village was off the beaten track) and George had pursued her, not ludicrously on short thin legs, screaming curses, but magnificently, passionately, on a coal-black horse. Lying back in her corner of the carriage, watching him, she felt slim and young and beautiful and desired. The motion of the train was soothing and rhythmic. . . George was pursuing her on a coal-black horse. . . She slid into a deep sleep. Her hat with its forest of black trimmings nodded gently to one side over her ear.

She awoke with a start as the train stopped in Victoria station.

It was the first time she had ever been to London. The hugeness of the station amazed and delighted her. She wandered round it for some time, hugging her packages to her, and gazing enraptured at the show cases. Then she went out to the station yard. Dusk was falling, and the electric signs flashed at her from the buildings around. She had never seen electric signs before, and she stood on the edge of the kerb, drunk with delight, watching them. Her mackintosh had slipped from her arm and trailed about her feet. The toasting-fork had worked its way through the meshes of the string bag and stuck out at an ungainly angle. She hugged to her the rush hamper and the newspaper parcel. It was beginning to rain, but she did not notice it. Her eyes were fixed ecstatically on the quickly changing colours that flamed through the dusk. She spelled the words aloud to herself in childish excitement.

The crowds who were surging in and out of the station looked at her in amused curiosity. A porter approached her.

"Do you want a taxi, mum?" he said.

That brought her thoughts to the problem of her destination, and she considered it for the first time.

"Taxi?" said the porter again impatiently. He felt

vaguely responsible for her while she hung about the station entrance like this, and he wanted to be rid of her.

"How much are they?" she said breathlessly.

"Sixpence a mile."

She looked about her uncertainly.

"Where do you want to go?" continued the porter.

"I don't know," she said. "I want somewhere to stay till I've got work. Do you know of anywhere?"

The porter scratched his head, and a taxi driver, mistaking the movement for a signal, started up his taxi from a stand in the station yard and drew in at the kerb.

"Perhaps he knows," said Euphemia. She turned to the taxi driver, "I want somewhere to stay till I've got work."

The taxi driver was an elderly man, who had acquired in the course of his career a knack of "placing" his customers with a lightning glance. His quick survey took in the string bag, the bulky packages, the cheap, badly fitting black clothes. But it took in also that indefinable something of speech and manner that had made her neighbours resent Euphemia as "stuck up," despite her gentleness and timidity.

"There's a ladies' residential club," he said slowly, "that ladies often stay at comin' from the country. Nip in an' I'll take you there."

Euphemia gathered up the trailing mackintosh and entered the taxi. The porter handed in her packages.

"Be careful of the geranium," she said anxiously.

She felt that it would spoil the whole adventure if the geranium were broken.

The lighted streets with their crowds of passers-by thrilled her. The motion of the taxi was exhilarating. She sat upright on the edge of the seat, clutching the string bag (she had pushed back the toasting-fork) and gazing eagerly out of the window. It was so wonderful that she felt it must be a dream. It occurred to her suddenly that only a week ago she had been hurrying up and down the steep narrow cottage stairs at her father's imperious summons. She still felt intoxicated with freedom.

The taxi drew up at a dignified Queen Anne house in

a square. There was a beautiful old fanlight over the massive door, the windows were long and exquisitely proportioned, with rounded tops. An old plane tree grew from the pavement just in front of the house. Despite its beauty and its gracious proportions, however, the house, like all its neighbours, had an elusive air of having come down in the world. There was something faintly dingy about it. Euphemia did not notice the dinginess. To her it was an enchanted house, a fairy palace. Her eyes were shining as she walked up to it, carrying the newspaper parcel, the string bag, the mackintosh, and the umbrella. The taxi man followed with the rush hamper. She rang the bell and stood waiting, her heart beating with excitement.

The woman who came to the door was dressed in black satin with elaborately waved hair and heavily powdered face. Beneath its coating of powder the face was lined and anxious and slightly aggressive. The aggressiveness deepened as her eyes took in Euphemia from the impossible hat to the large patched shoes.

Then they fell upon the newspaper parcel and the woman drew herself up as if outraged. . . Really, the place was going down, everyone knew, but -- *this*! It hadn't come to *this* yet.

She was on the point of saying icily, "There's a Y.W.C.A. hostel six doors farther on," when Euphemia spoke, in a voice that was unexpectedly pleasant, a voice that rang with friendliness and hope and courage and a strange baffling youthfulness.

"Good evening. May I stay here till I get work? It's such a *lovely* place. And the tree outside makes it seem quite in the country."

A maid had appeared in the hall.

"Take madam up to room 7," said the woman curtly.

The taxi man handed the rush hamper to the maid and went back to his taxi. Euphemia had paid him his exact fare (it had never occurred to her to pay him more), but he did not resent that. Instead he felt relief at having left her safely installed in the Belgravia Ladies' Residential Club. Remembering her now, as he drove off, with her

heavy, middle-aged face, he wondered what on earth had made him feel so responsible for her. A woman of that age can look after herself all right. . .

Miss Cliffe, the proprietress of the Belgravia Ladies' Residential Club, was still standing in the hall watching Euphemia's figure as she slowly followed the maid upstairs. Her eyes took in once more the appalling string bag, crowned by the pot of geranium, and the still more appalling newspaper parcel that the maid carried with a suggestion of aloofness and contempt.

She was thinking: I shall lose Mrs. Lancaster now. She'll go the minute she sets eyes on her. She's always grumbling at me for letting the place down by taking in people who aren't gentlefolks. She said she'd go the next time. . . .

Generally Miss Cliffe defended the visitors whom Mrs. Lancaster attacked. But -- she threw a despairing glance at the figure of Euphemia, which was just turning the bend of the staircase -- she couldn't defend this.

She put her hand to her head with a bewildered gesture. "Whatever came over me," she said, "to take her?"

VI

THE luxury of the bedroom amazed and delighted Euphemia.

There was a dressing-table with a three-pier mirror, a wardrobe, a marble-topped washhand-stand, a small table by the bedside, a larger one in the middle of the room, an easy chair, a waste-paper basket, and a gas fire. There were two electric lights— one over the dressing-table, the other over the bed. The white enamel of the furniture was cracked and discoloured, the wooden skirting board was badly in need of another coat of paint, the wallpaper and curtains were faded, and a large piece was chipped off the china door-handle. Euphemia, however, noticed none of this. She would have noticed, of course, had the room not been clean, but its shabbiness was immaculate. She wandered about, eager, excited, happy. The electric light over the bed fascinated her. She turned it on and off several times as if it were a toy. Then she unpacked the rush hamper, putting her personal belongings away in the drawers and wardrobe. After that she spent several minutes trying the effect of the geranium on dressing-table, window-sill, and mantelpiece— deciding finally on the window-sill. The photograph of her mother she put on the mantelpiece. The faded girlish face seemed to smile at her in conspiratorial eagerness as if they were having one of their old games of make-believe grandeur ("Now pretend you're Lady Angela in your bedroom, and I'll be the French maid").

Over the mantelpiece hung a framed card of "Rules." After informing Euphemia that meals in bedrooms were

sixpence extra and that the proprietress was not responsible for valuables unless left in her charge, it went on to request her not to use electric light after midnight or wash clothes in the bathroom, and ended with a list of the meal times. Dinner was at seven-thirty. Euphemia glanced at the alarum clock that now ticked merrily on the table by her bed. It was after seven. She must not dawdle any longer. . . . She took off the black blouse and skirt (the skirt had already settled itself into permanent creases after the manner of cheap serge) and washed her face and hands at the small, marble-topped washhand-stand. The can of hot water and the damask face towel pleased her so much that she prolonged the operation with childish delight. As she did her hair and put on the frilly fichue blue woollen dress that pulled in ugly lines across her ample figure, she was Lady Angela Trevor at Haydon Court, changing into her white satin dress, wreathing the string of pearls and the red rose into her hair. As she put on the cheap ward shoes, they became slippers of gold brocade.

When she had finished dressing, she took the carafe from her washhand-stand and gave a few drops of water to the geranium, not because it needed it but as a friendly attention. The geranium had in the course of her journey come to represent to her the tutelary deity of Home. Standing there in its pot on the window-sill, it gave to the strange luxurious bedroom the necessary touch of familiarity. It was, as it were, a bridge spanning thinly the gulf between the old life and the new. It assured her that she was awake, that it was not all a fantastic dream.

At this point came a distant resonant sound that Euphemia, with sudden quickening of her heart, recognised as the dinner-bell.

The dining-room was shabby and Victorian and so much overcrowded with small tables that it needed great skill to thread one's way between them. In her passage to the table allotted to her, Euphemia knocked on to the floor two dinner-rolls, three table napkins, and an avalanche of cutlery. She apologised for each profusely and with

much embarrassment. Miss Cliffe led her to a small table at the farther end of the room. It was not a popular table among the guests, as its occupant had to sit with her back against the garden door, which, even when closed, admitted a piercing draught. The garden door was a great drawback to the dining-room, and Miss Cliffe had often vaguely meant to have it taken away and the wall continued in its place, but there never seemed to be money enough, and, of course, there was no other room that could conveniently be used as a dining-room while the alteration was going on. No guest ever stayed at that table for more than one meal. After that one meal she indignantly demanded another table and threatened to leave the club at once if it were not given to her. The table had been unoccupied now for several weeks, and it afforded Miss Cliffe a malicious satisfaction to offer it to the new arrival. She thought: She'll complain, and I'll say there's no other table available. I'll say all the other empty ones are booked by people who're coming next week. It'll be a good way of getting rid of her. Though heaven knows why I should want to turn good money away in these days. It's scarce enough.

Euphemia, however, was impervious to the draught. She sat there, dwarfing her microscopic table, lost in admiration of the room,—the huge tortuous overmantel with its innumerable inset mirrors and little shelves, each supporting an irrelevant china ornament, the faded rose lights, the flowers on the little tables, the shining glass and cutlery.

A waitress set a plate of soup before her, and Euphemia automatically began to play the game she had played so often with her mother in the kitchen at home. She was Lady Angela Trevor dining in the panelled dining-room at Haydon Court. It gave her quite a shock, when she looked up at the waitress's face, to find it freckled and blue-eyed and crowned by a mop of red hair. She expected to see her mother's face, faded, girlish, plaintive-looking. Miss Cliffe, watching her closely from behind the service table where she was carving wafer-like slices of roast beef,

thought: She knows how to eat, anyway; that's something. But her clothes are awful. . . Look at the way they're all watching her. Well, I get sick of the airs they give themselves. They think they're too good for the place. Mrs. Lancaster's lorgnettes are going up again. She'll have plenty to say about it afterwards.

Her eyes wandered down Euphemia's figure, over the shapeless blue flannel dress with its incongruous frills to the black ribbed woollen stockings and large cheap ward shoes, and her heart sank. She's really dreadful, she thought. I oughtn't to have taken her. When I look at her now, I can't think why I did. I must have been mad. No references or anything.

So intent was Euphemia on her game of make-believe that she hardly noticed her fellow-guests. When she had finished her dinner, however, she began to look about her. The room was emptying now, as the guests rose one by one and went through the further door into the lounge, where coffee was served. Euphemia followed them, happily, trustingly, like a child in a company of grown-ups. The strange, exhilarating feeling of being born again still upheld her. No obstacle seemed too great for her to overcome. It was as if her youth had gathered strength in its long frustration and were running away with her like a horse made restive by lack of exercise.

All the arm-chairs in the lounge were already occupied, so she sat down in a small upright chair near the door, still gazing around her with naive, impersonal interest.

The room was as shabby and old-fashioned as the rest of the house. A cabinet of ill-assorted "curios" stood in the corner. Next to it a piano turned its back to the room, revealing festoons of torn and faded silk. The mantelpiece was covered with pieces of Goss china and photographs of Miss Cliffe's relations in silver frames. On an occasional table near the fireplace stood a vase of artificial chrysanthemums that had once been yellow but had now faded to a dingy grey. There was, however, a cheerful fire in the grate, and the chairs, drawn round it in a semicircle, were

comfortable despite their shabbiness. There was not a speck of dust to be seen anywhere.

A housemaid handed round coffee on a tray. It was the custom at the Belgravia Ladies' Residential Club for the guests to converse sociably for a quarter of an hour or so over their coffee before they separated for the evening. The conversation was desultory and guarded, a cautious drawing together of cliques with a faint under-current of hostility. Mrs. Lancaster was the acknowledged autocrat, and the two chief factions consisted of those who accepted her autocracy and those who challenged it.

Euphemia sat listening to the conversation and watching the other guests with a shy, eager, childlike gaze. She did not realise, of course, that they were markedly ignoring her. It would never have occurred to her that anyone should speak to her. She felt like a looker-on at some magnificent spectacle. It was Mrs. Lancaster to whom her admiring glances were chiefly directed. Mrs. Lancaster was pretty and gracious, with white hair, blue eyes, and a charming smile. She was like a flower that has just begun to shrivel but is still beautiful. So kind too, thought Euphemia. A smile and a pleasant word for everyone. Faded though she was and very simply dressed, she represented the Rank and Beauty that Euphemia had always worshipped. Someone had mentioned Rochester, and Mrs. Lancaster was saying, "We had a hunter called Rochester when I was a child, and I always used to think that the place was called after him. It was a silly name for a horse, but my uncle called him that. My uncle gave up hunting and sold all his horses when he was made a bishop, and my father bought several of them."

Euphemia thrilled. Hunters . . . bishops . . . Lady Angela Trevor had kept hunters . . . her uncle had been a bishop. And Mrs. Lancaster said it as casually as if it were quite a matter of course for people to keep hunters and have bishops for uncles.

"Was he the uncle who preached before King Edward?" said a middle-aged, earnest-looking woman who sat next to her. She had thin, untidy hair, a pale fat face, and a

retroussé nose, and she leaned towards Mrs. Lancaster as she spoke in a manner that was a mixture of the reverent and proprietary.

She's her friend, thought Euphemia. Hunters and bishops are quite ordinary things to her, too. She must try to remember their names. Mrs. Lancaster was the one whose father had kept hunters and whose uncle had been a bishop, and Miss Greeves was her friend.

"Oh, he often preached before King Edward," said Mrs. Lancaster casually. "He was my father's favourite brother. We had a charming drawing by Winterhalter of the two of them as boys that used to hang in the dining-room. It had to go, of course, like everything else, when the Manor was sold."

Euphemia's imagination was busily at work. Mrs. Lancaster had had to sell the Manor—haunt of hunters and bishops—to pay the debts of honour that her husband had left. Her son had gone out to the Colonies when he was twenty-one. He had not been heard of since, but he would return a millionaire and once again Mrs. Lancaster would move in her accustomed atmosphere of hunters and bishops, bearing soups and jellies to devoted cottagers.

Euphemia would have liked the son to marry the faithful friend, but even in Euphemia's rose-spectacled eyes the faithful friend was too plain and elderly for this rôle. So she invented a bride of radiant beauty and sweetness for the son, while Mrs. Lancaster and the faithful friend went to live at the Dower House. There they spent the evening of their lives together, tended and cherished by the son and his wife and surrounded by numerous grandchildren of the "Bovril picture" type.

Two girls, who were sitting on a sofa by the door, ostentatiously aloof, exchanged grimaces when Mrs. Lancaster mentioned the Manor. Euphemia's gaze turned upon them with sudden interest. They looked like the figures on the backs of the fashion papers that had sometimes been on sale in the village shop. They were much smarter than anyone else in the room. *Débutantes*, decided Euphemia, who had come up to London for the season

to be presented. She gazed at them with eager admiration, speculating upon the romance and magnificence of their lives.

"And how is your work getting on, Mrs. Lewes?" Mrs. Lancaster was saying in the suave voice that, for all its gentleness, was curiously penetrating.

Euphemia turned her eyes slowly to a stout, majestic, middle-aged woman with an elaborate "front" and a good deal of old-fashioned jewellery who sat very upright in her chair by the fireplace, her eyes fixed on her crochet work. She gave a curious impression of isolation in the crowded little room, as though she were miles away from it all.

She started at Mrs. Lancaster's question, but looked up with a pleased smile and began to unfold the roll of crotchet.

"I'm getting on slowly," she said, "it's a more difficult pattern than it looks."

"What is it for?" said Mrs. Lancaster.

"A tea cloth. I'm just getting to the first corner. I always feel nervous at the corners."

"I'm sure you do," said Mrs. Lancaster sweetly. "I think you're splendid. It's beautiful."

She's *sweet*, thought Euphemia enthusiastically. Interested in everything and kind to everyone.

With a gracious nod to Mrs. Lewes, Mrs. Lancaster had turned to a woman with a thin, tired, serious face that wore incongruously a fixed bright smile.

"Have you had a busy day, Miss Beech?"

Miss Beech replied with a breeziness that seemed to employ every particle of her energy.

"The busier I am, the better pleased I am, Mrs. Lancaster. This little girl isn't one to sit down and twiddle her thumbs."

"And what have you been doing today?"

"Trying to make naughty girls good and good girls better," said Miss Beech with a high-pitched laugh.

Miss Cliffe stood at the door, watching the guests. She had poured out the coffee and was waiting till the cups had been collected by the red-haired waitress. She felt tired

and dispirited. How abominably patronising the woman is, she thought, watching Mrs. Lancaster. I wonder someone doesn't get up and smack her face. I would, if I were one of them. If anyone ever leaves me a fortune so that I can afford to do it, that's the first thing I'll do. I'll smack Mrs. Lancaster's face. I'll do it even if I have to go to prison for it. . . . That snob of a Miss Greeves, of course, makes her worse, toadying up to her, waiting on her like a lady's maid. . . . She's seen those two girls laughing at her, and she'll be on at me about them again. . . . "We've never had typists in the place before, Miss Cliffe. Surely we haven't quite come to that." (She derived a certain gloomy satisfaction from a mental parody of Mrs. Lancaster's suave tones.) They give a good deal less trouble than she does, anyway, and pay more. I've a good mind to say that to her, if she mentions them again. What's wrong with typists, anyway? They earn their living, which is more than she does. And she needn't worry. They're going all right. They've got friendly with some girls who live at that place up the road, and they're always there now. I bet anyone anything that they'll give in their notice by the end of the week. It's bright and arty, with divans and rugs and curtains that hit you in the eye. And *filthy*. I wish they could see the kitchen. Still, I don't blame them in a way. This place is full of frumps. I know I couldn't stick it if I was their age. . . . Oh yes, she's being very pleasant to Mrs. Lewes. She wouldn't say a word to her if it were Friday and the poor old thing were full of her daughter's letter. Too grand to hear about a country parson's wife. The poor old thing's quite flattered to be spoken to by her. . . . Always so *sweet*. . . . Well, if she'd lived with her sweetness as long as I have, she'd have lost her taste for it. . . . Now why *does* Miss Beech put on that manner? I wish someone would tell her. I wish I'd got the courage to tell her. Why doesn't she be herself? When you get her alone, she's quite different - quiet and simple. She's interesting about her work, too, when she talks about it properly - not making fun of it, as she does before people. . . . Her eyes wandered to the last arrival, and her heart sank

lower. She's *awful*. I must have been *mad*. I've told people who look ten times as respectable as she does that there's no room for them. Mrs. Lancaster's sure to want to speak to me about her tonight. Well, the one thing I won't stand again is being sent for to her bedroom instead of her coming to my office. If she sends me a message asking me to come to her, I'll send her a message back that I'm in the office if she wants to speak to me. I get no profit out of her. She beat me down to two guineas a week and wants waiting on hand and foot. . . Her eyes were drawn again to Euphemia, who sat, large, ungraceful, and motionless, still watching the company like a child at a play. . . . I've never known anyone not complain about that draught before. I must just tell her tomorrow that I'm too full up to keep her.

Mrs. Lancaster rose, gathering up her scarf and bag, and swept her gracious smile around the room. It rested, sweet and serene, upon Euphemia for a few seconds before it passed on. Euphemia thrilled with pride and pleasure.

"Good night," said Mrs. Lancaster with an ineffably radiant dignity as she departed, followed by Miss Greeves.

One of the girls on the sofa gave a quick, impudent imitation of Mrs. Lancaster's smile and bow, and the other went into convulsions of stifled laughter.

The maid gathered the coffee cups on to the tray and departed, followed by Miss Cliffe.

One of the girls stretched and said, "Let's go to the pictures." They rose slowly from the sofa, throwing glances of scornful defiance at the remaining guests. When their glances reached Euphemia, however, they collapsed suddenly into giggles and fled precipitately from the room.

Euphemia's heart warmed to them. They were children. She had always liked children. She wished she could have gone to the pictures with them. She had never been to the pictures, though she had read about them in the papers.

Conversation had become freer since Mrs. Lancaster and Miss Cliffe had gone. A vivacious little woman, whom

Euphemia had not noticed before, was now sitting in the chair that Mrs. Lancaster had occupied. She was "up for the Sales," she said, and described her day's purchases in detail. She was wearing a dress composed of four different and not altogether harmonious materials that she had made herself, she said proudly, from remnants bought the last time she was "up for the Sales". No one displayed much interest, so she went on volubly to describe her house and garden and children. It was a point of honour with the residents to ignore the birds of passage, and only Euphemia listened to her. Euphemia indeed listened with flattering attention. . . . What a lovely place it must be—a sunk garden, brick paths, a sundial, a pergola, running water (cold *and* hot) in all the bedrooms, wood blocks on the floors, a verandah. In imagination Euphemia roamed from end to end of the house, wandered in and out of the garden, picking the roses, telling the time by the sundial, turning on the taps in the bedrooms. . . .

The vivacious little lady after vainly trying to catch the eyes of the other occupants of the lounge had returned to Euphemia as her only listener, but obviously did not consider her worthy of the confidences. Daunted but vivacious as ever, she rose and gathered up her things. "Well, I must go and write a few letters before I go to bed. My husband's sure to worry if he doesn't hear from me tomorrow morning. He gets in a dreadful state if I don't write at once. And the children will all be wanting their picture post cards from Mummy." There was a note of triumph in her voice. She was thinking: Stuffy old things, living in this dingy hole and thinking such a lot of themselves. There isn't one of them that wouldn't give their souls to be in my shoes, with a husband and a nice home. Jealous—that's what they are. Pretending to turn their noses up at me. Jealous as cats.

"Well, good night, all," she said brightly. "See you in the morning," and went out.

Euphemia's gaze followed her wistfully to the door. She longed to know exactly where the sundial was, and what the drawing-curtains were made of, and how many children

the lady had, and what their names were. Perhaps she would talk again tomorrow and tell them more.

A tall, graceful woman, who had come into the room after the coffee had been removed, lowered her novel, as the door closed, and glanced round the room. She must have been strikingly handsome in her youth, but her face was set now in permanent lines of bitterness and disappointment. Her grey hair was beautifully dressed, and her black evening gown was obviously expensive.

"Enjoyed your holiday, Miss Furmore?" said the social worker brightly.

Miss Furmore's disdainful mouth twisted into a weary smile.

"Immensely, thank you."

"Glad to be back?"

"Glad to be back?" echoed Miss Furmore wonderingly. "Well, if it weren't that I'm going away again in a fortnight's time, I don't think I could endure it. The place seems more hopeless every time I come back to it. The cooking's *shocking*. Dinner tonight . . .!" The tight lips curled in disgust. "And the clientèle seems to get more appalling every day." Her insolent gaze flickered over Euphemia, who fortunately did not know the meaning of the word clientèle.

"It certainly isn't what *I've* been accustomed to," put in a woman with hair of a distressing shade of henna and a very *décolleté* green net dress.

"I'm away so much that it simply isn't worth my while to pay a lot for a *piéd à terre*," went on Miss Furmore. "I'm never here more than a fortnight at a time, you know. It's cheap, and that's all one can say for it. How Mrs. Lancaster can endure to *live* here!"

"I go away quite often," put in the hennaed lady hastily, "or I couldn't stand it either. . . . Where are you going in a fortnight's time, Miss Furmore?"

"A cousin in Scotland. He's having a shooting party. I shall probably spend Easter with them, too. Well, there doesn't seem to be anything to do in this place but go to bed, so good night."

She took up her book and a small brocaded evening bag, and made her elegant sinuous way to the door without looking back.

There were left Euphemia, the social worker, the hennaed lady, and the crocheting lady with the "front." The last still sat upright, motionless, silent, oblivious of everything but her work.

The hennaed lady came over to the social worker, drawing her chair very close and sinking her voice to a piercing whisper.

"The way Furmore *dresses*, my dear! Spends every farthing on her back. She's always in debt to Cliffe. Well, what I say is, what good does it do her? Goes off to her grand relations and comes back just as she was. Of course, what she's after is a husband. With money, of course. Why else does she sink every penny on clothes and trail round to all their house parties and things? She's had looks, too, in her day, you can see that. Oh, I know what I know. Turned down dozens of men in her time that she'd give her eyes for now. Comes of smart county people, you know. Her father speculated and lost every penny."

"How terrible!" said the social worker brightly, relieved to find an occasion for a Christian comment that would not prejudice her character as a good sport.

"Oh, yes," went on the hennaed lady mysteriously. "Left her with two hundred and fifty a year, and she spends every *farthing* on her back. Cadges invitations and tries to get off. Her people and Lancaster's used to belong to the same set, you know, but they hate each other like poison. Wheels within wheels, you know. Do you notice Furmore never comes in here till Lancaster's gone upstairs? Personally I prefer Furmore. Lancaster's too sweet for my taste. And, my *dear*" --she pressed more closely to the social worker, and her whisper sank to a penetrating whistle--"those two typists! *Typists!* We've never sunk to *typists* before. I know you work for your living, dear, but in such a nice way. But--*typists!* . . . Did you see them going off together tonight? My private belief is that they're no better than they should be. I told Cliffe when she took

them in that she was asking for trouble. I said, "There's not a kinder, broadminded person than me in the world, Miss Cliffe, but I know what I know, and, once you begin to take a class like that, you can't expect to keep the other class." But I couldn't get any satisfaction out of her. Wheels within wheels, you know. . . Of course, the place has come down dreadfully since I first came here."

Her bright glance wandered to Euphemia as if savouring her and finding her an irresistible morsel; then her whisper sank still lower, till it resembled the sound of an east wind through a keyhole.

"I don't want to name any names - - " it began.

But the social worker had taken advantage of the slight pause to gather her things together, still with her fixed bright smile. One must be sympathetic and tolerant and a good sport. One must prove to people that a Christian social worker wasn't a killjoy. It was all very difficult, and made one frightfully tired.

"Well, it's been simply ripping having this little chat with you," she said with a sort of dogged vivacity, "and," vaguely, "of course I always believe that there's good in *everyone* once you get to know them." She paused. Was this being priggish? One mustn't seem disapproving of a harmless little gossip. One must be elastic. "At least," she added vaguely, "nearly everyone. And one never does get *really* to know anyone, does one? But now" — she jumped to her feet and said with a last desperate flash of brightness — "I'm going to be a good little girl and go to bed."

She darted her strained, bright smile round the room, said, "Good night, everyone," and disappeared.

The hennaed lady looked speculatively from Euphemia to the unresponsive crocheter. She had obviously quite a lot to say if a suitable audience could be found, but the speculative glance weighed both these audiences in the balance and found them wanting. She gathered up her things, murmured, "Good night," rather distantly, and vanished in the wake of the social worker. She hoped that

she might overtake the social worker and ask her into her bedroom to make tea with her and discuss this last ghastly blunder of Miss Cliffe's that sat in the drawing-room looking almost too appalling to be real. But the social worker, fearful of this, had escaped with undignified speed to her room, where she need not be bright and tolerant and a good sport, and where she decided once more that life was very, very difficult, and tried to redress the general balance of things by making special mention in her prayers of all the people whom she had allowed Mrs. Horner to criticise.

In the drawing-room Euphemia sat at one end of the semicircle of empty chairs, facing Mrs. Lewes at the other end. Mrs. Lewes had been apparently unaware of the comings and goings and conversation of the whole evening, except for the few moments when Mrs. Lancaster had directly addressed her. She sat erect, her eyes on her work, reminding Euphemia of a rock in a stream of swirling water. Euphemia was conscious suddenly of an overpowering weariness. She felt that she must get to her bedroom while her feet would still take her there. She rose abruptly. She had, unlike the others, no bag and scarf to gather up. Her thick, high-necked flannel dress needed no scarf. Her worn leather purse reposed in a large pocket in the skirt and would have completely spoilt the "hang" of it had there been any "hang" to spoil.

She murmured "Good night" timidly and went from the room.

Upstairs she was surprised and touched to find her nightdress laid out on her bed (the chambermaid had sent the head housemaid into convulsions by trying it on), a hot-water bottle in her bed, and a jug of hot water in her basin. The effort of coming upstairs seemed to have dispersed her sudden weariness, and she felt far too much excited to go to bed. She took her Shakespeare from the little pile of books and sat down, with a pleasant feeling of luxury, in the easy chair to read it. Opening it at random, she began to read, first to herself, then in a whisper, then louder, louder, as the words gripped her:

In peace there's nothing so becomes a man
 As modest stillness and humility.
 But when the blast of war blows in our ears,
 Then imitate the action of the tiger;
 Stiffen the sinews, summon up the blood,
 Disguise fair nature with hard-favoured rage; . . .

There came a knock at the door. Euphemia dragged herself from Harfleur into a strange and startlingly luxurious bedroom. Then her eyes fell upon the geranium, and at once she felt at home.

She went to the door and opened it. Miss Greeves stood there, wearing a much-beflowered dressing-gown and clasping a hot-water bottle to her bosom. She looked fierce and outraged. She spoke in a tone of icy politeness.

"I'm so sorry to trouble you," she said, "but Mrs. Lancaster is sleeping next door, and she'd be *most* grateful if you'd kindly make a little less noise."

With that she vanished abruptly. Euphemia felt, not angry nor resentful nor even penitent, but, on the other hand, flattered and gratified. Accustomed to her father's curt orders, she found the message almost incredibly friendly and polite. "Sorry to trouble you." "Most grateful." "Kindly." How good all these people were! The episode seemed like a thread connecting her with the thrilling life of this house. She felt for the first time that she belonged to it, was part of it. These people sent her messages couched in terms of friendliness. She was one of them. . . The tiredness had come over her again. She must go to bed and get a good night's sleep. She must be fresh for tomorrow, because tomorrow she had to find work. She took off her shoes and tiptoed in stockinged feet across the room, so as not to disturb Mrs. Lancaster again (she was glad that she was next door to Mrs. Lancaster). She undressed, washed, put on the old-fashioned calico nightdress and dressing-gown, and brushed out her long, thick brown hair. Then she took her Bible from the little pile of books and turned to the story of David and Goliath. She turned to it rather guiltily, feeling that it would be more suitable to be reading a chapter of the

New Testament on this first evening of a fresh life, but she could not resist the fascination that the Old Testament stories always had for her.

"And David said unto Saul, Thy servant kept his father's sheep, and there came a lion, and a bear, and took a lamb out of the flock: and I went out after him, and smote him, and delivered it out of his mouth: and when he rose against me, I caught him by his beard, and smote him, and slew him. Thy servant slew both the lion and the bear: and this uncircumcised Philistine shall be as one of them. . . ."

"Thou comest to me with a sword, and with a spear, and with a shield: but I come to thee in the name of the Lord of hosts."

She found that she was reading the words aloud again and clapped her hand to her mouth like a child caught in the act of talking in school. She read to the end of the chapter, then looked at the clock. She ought to get into bed now. She would have liked to celebrate this wonderful day by reading another of her favourite chapters, Deborah's song, for instance. But she knew that she would begin to shout again if she did that. She couldn't read Deborah's song without shouting:

"Praise ye the Lord for the avenging of Israel, when the people willingly offered themselves. Hear, O ye kings, give ear, O ye princes; I, even I, will sing unto the Lord; I will sing praise to the Lord God of Israel."

No one could read words like that without shouting. . .

She closed the Bible and knelt down by her bedside to repeat the Lord's Prayer, but she found it impossible to keep her mind on the words.

"Thy kingdom come." . . . She saw the second-hand furniture dealer, peering at her indignantly from the dim recess behind his counter. "Thy will be done" . . . she saw George running down the road after the 'bus, his ugly little mouth hanging open, his pale blue eyes protruding—"on earth as it is in Heaven" . . . she saw the 'bus conductor, boyish and confident, telling her about his girl and the home he meant to have . . . "Give us this day" . . . she saw the semicircle of magnificent guests sitting round

the lounge—"our daily bread." . . . And it had all happened *today*. . . . She could hardly believe it. Only yesterday she had been sitting in the darkened kitchen with no thought of anything but marrying George. It was all so wonderful that just to think of it made her feel dazed.

There came another knock at the door. Euphemia rose to her feet.

"Come in."

Miss Cliffe entered.

"Are you quite comfortable, Miss Tracy? Have you everything you want?"

"Yes, thank you," said Euphemia.

"Good night."

"Good night."

Miss Cliffe went out, closing the door firmly.

How *kind* everyone was! They couldn't have been kinder if she'd been an old friend.

It was all like a dream. It wasn't any use trying to finish saying the Lord's Prayer. She was too much excited and too tired.

She switched off the light and got into bed.

VII

"SHE's mad, of course," said Mrs. Lancaster calmly.

Miss Greeves slipped the hot-water bottle between the sheets of Mrs. Lancaster's bed with the air of a high priestess performing a sacred rite.

"Stark," she agreed. "I'd be careful to lock my bedroom door tonight if I were you."

"I shall, my dear. Did she say anything?"

"I didn't give her a chance. I just repeated your message and came away."

"Shouting like that at the top of her voice! I suppose she *was* alone in the room?"

"Oh yes. I could see every corner of it. Quite alone."

"She ought to be in an asylum. I shouldn't be at all surprised if that's where she's come from. . . I simply can't think how Miss Cliffe——" Mrs. Lancaster shrugged. "That's the worst of a woman with no standards, of course. Why on earth couldn't she have sent her on to the Y.W.C.A.? I shall insist on her doing that tomorrow morning. They'll be able to deal with her there. If she isn't mad, she's worse."

"I'm so sorry she's next to you, darling," said Miss Greeves, craning towards her solicitously. "I'm afraid that it will worry you."

"Well, at least there's a wall between us, and I can lock my door. When we were downstairs in the lounge having coffee I looked at her, and—well, you know, I try not to think of the old days, and I'm not—I really think I'm *not*—snobbish. I mean, what I've gone through has

knocked out of me anything of that sort I used to have in the old days——"

"Darling," murmured Miss Greeves, her flat, nebulous face glowing with adoration, "you're *wonderful*!"

"I'm not wonderful," said Mrs. Lancaster with a light, gay intonation that suggested infinite courage. "I'm only a very ordinary woman who's had a lot of hard knocks and who's tried always to take them smiling. I've sunk down from the class I was born in to one that I hardly knew the existence of in the old days. Well, I've tried to keep my own standards without expecting to find them in those around me."

Mrs. Lancaster paused for a moment, after administering this pinprick, then continued suavely, "What I was going to say was that this evening when I saw her in the lounge I couldn't help wondering what Papa would have felt if he'd thought that I should ever have to sit in a room on equal terms with a woman like that. She wouldn't have been admitted to the servants' hall in my old home."

"*Darling*," said Miss Greeves again, earnestly. "You must be firm with Miss Cliffe. Typists are bad enough, but when it comes to *this*——"

Miss Greeves had winced slightly as the pinprick went home, and its memory intensified the disdain in her voice as she uttered the word "typists." After all, she might not be Lydia's social equal—she never for a moment pretended that she was—but at least her father had belonged to the professional class (he had been a dentist whom his family always described as "practically qualified"), and she was assistant secretary in a school to which the daughters of tradespeople were not admitted.

Mrs. Lancaster smiled—the sweet, brave smile that never failed to thrill her friend.

"Well, when I first saw her," she said, "I admit that I thought for a moment that the charwoman had come in by mistake. Fortunately one's sense of humour and one's breeding carry one through almost anything. I don't think I let anyone see how I felt, did I? I tried not to."

"You were *sweet*, darling," said Miss Greeves with

passionate intensity. "You always *are* sweet. I could *kill* that Cliffe woman. One would think that with *you* in the house she'd be so careful who she took in."

"Oh, my dear, I've long given up expecting standards from Miss Cliffe."

Miss Greeves was drawing up the small sofa to the fire and arranging its cushions.

"Come and put your feet up here, darling, and let me make you a cup of tea before you go to bed. You'd like one, wouldn't you?"

"I'd love one, dear. Frankly, I *am* a little upset—but I do so hate to give you trouble."

"*Trouble!*" said Miss Greeves fiercely. "You know how I love to do anything for you. Come and lie down here and be comfy."

She arranged Mrs. Lancaster on the sofa, fussing about her with shawl and cushions till Mrs. Lancaster, the sweetness of her voice faintly edged with impatience, said: "I'm quite comfy now, dear. And *quite* ready for that cup of tea you're going to make."

Miss Greeves put a small kettle on the gas ring and took cups and saucers and a tin of biscuits from an old mahogany corner cupboard that hung on the wall.

Mrs. Lancaster lay relaxed on the sofa, cushions beneath her head and an embroidered Chinese shawl spread over her feet. She made a pretty picture in the firelight with her white hair and blue eyes and pink cheeks. The colour of her silk embroidered *négligé* matched her eyes. Mrs. Lancaster generally managed to have a touch of that blue about her toilets.

The room was the best bedroom of the house, with two large windows and an elaborate marble mantelpiece. On the mantelpiece was massed an imposing array of photographs—Mrs. Lancaster as a little girl on a pony, a groom in attendance; Mrs. Lancaster as a *débutante* in her presentation dress; Mrs. Lancaster as a bride in her wedding dress; Mrs. Lancaster's father in court dress, in shooting clothes, in yachting outfit; Mrs. Lancaster's mother in a dog-cart holding the reins, one groom at the horse's head

and another sitting behind her with folded arms; a house-party on the steps of a large mansion set in spacious, park-like grounds. An oil painting of the same mansion hung above the mantelpiece. Signed photographs of King Edward and the Empress Eugénie stood conspicuously on a small table in a window recess.

All the furniture in the room belonged to Mrs. Lancaster and had been salvaged from the wreck of her fortunes.

In a glass cabinet on one side of the fireplace were some valuable pieces of Worcester china and some Leeds figures. There was a Sheraton writing-desk in the second window recess. The couch on which Mrs. Lancaster was lying was an Empire piece that had belonged to her grandfather.

Miss Greeves had come to the Belgravia Ladies' Residential Club seven years ago and had lost no time in attaching herself to Mrs. Lancaster. Flattered first of all by Mrs. Lancaster's universal sweetness, she had discovered soon enough that it was a wall of ice protecting Mrs. Lancaster from the world and that it never admitted you an inch further than on the first meeting. She had battled her way through it, accepting snubs and humiliations with unvarying meekness, till at last she had made herself indispensable to her idol. Her adoration of Mrs. Lancaster was twofold. She was a snob, and time and familiarity could never dull for her the thrill of sitting in this room on terms of friendly intimacy with its owner. The other bond between them was of a different kind. The delicate prettiness of Mrs. Lancaster, her blue eyes and pink and white cheeks and unvarying sweetness of manner, tapped a deep well of maternal tenderness in Miss Greeves that nothing had ever reached before. As she fluttered about her now, handing her a tea-cup, rearranging her cushions, she was in part a feudal serf waiting on her mistress and in part a mother petting a beloved child.

Mrs. Lancaster had grown dependent on Miss Greeves for a good many small services and comforts, but occasionally she would form a sudden friendship with one of the better-class women who stayed for a few days at the

club, asking her to her bedroom every evening and ignoring Miss Greeves completely. At these times Miss Greeves suffered torments of jealousy. Mrs. Lancaster was always particularly affectionate to her when their friendship was resumed.

"Delicious," said Mrs. Lancaster, putting down her teacup. "Sweet of you to make it, darling. Of course, the worst of women in Miss Cliffe's position is that, not being gentlepeople themselves, they are not judges of gentlepeople. . . Still, I ought to have got used to that by now, and, anyway, I do feel *ever* so much refreshed by your lovely cup of tea, darling."

"I'm so glad. . . Shall I read to you a little?"

Miss Greeves was sitting on a footstool by the sofa, her face upraised to her friend's.

Mrs. Lancaster, as always when she was tired, found the soulful expression of Miss Greeves' flat, pale face, with its faintly etched features, irritating. She sat up and lowered her feet, so that Miss Greeves had to move the footstool further away.

"No, thank you, dear. I think I'll go to bed now. I wonder— No, I mustn't ask you."

"What?"

"No, it's all right. It was only something I was going to ask you to do for me, but, of course, you're tired——"

"I'm *not*. And you know I *love* doing things for you."

After several minutes Miss Greeves dragged the requests from an apparently reluctant Mrs. Lancaster and finally went away with an armful of Mrs. Lancaster's underclothing that needed "just a stitch" and a dress of Mrs. Lancaster's from which a stain had to be removed.

"And I'd be so grateful," Mrs. Lancaster had ended, "if you'd run down and ask Miss Cliffe if she'd be so very good as to come up here to speak to me if it's quite convenient. . . . Don't come back, dear. I just want to speak to Miss Cliffe and then go to bed. You've filled my hot-water bottle, haven't you?"

Miss Cliffe, sitting in her little office studying a ledger,

received the message with an absent nod of her head. "I'm busy just at present, but I'll go up as soon as I can."

"Coward!" she said to herself as the door closed. "Why couldn't you send back a message telling her to come down here?"

But she had known in her heart all the time that she would not have the courage to do that. Her message was a feeble compromise. She was not busy, and, if she had to go up, she might as well go up at once and get it over. She closed the ledger on which she had pretended to be engaged when Miss Greeves entered, and began slowly to mount the stairs, her indignation increasing at each step. . . . The woman paid less than anyone in the house (she'd been a fool to let her beat her down to two guineas) and was meaner. She'd make a fuss over a halfpenny on her laundry bill. And she had jewellery and china that would fetch *hundreds* if only she'd sell them. Not one penny profit did the place make out of her, and she demanded early morning tea and meals in her bedroom whenever she wanted them ("But surely it was agreed two guineas *inclusive*, Miss Cliffe"). Seemed to think she did them a favour by living in the place at all. Well, she'd had enough of it. It wasn't worth the bother. If Mrs. Lancaster threatened to go somewhere else tonight, she'd tell her that she could go and good riddance.

When she reached Mrs. Lancaster's door she felt so breathless with indignation that she had to stand there for a few moments to regain her composure. Then she knocked very firmly and briskly, the sort of knock that, she thought with satisfaction, showed she didn't mean to be trifled with. Mrs. Lancaster came to the door herself and opened it wide with a welcoming gesture. At least that little toady of a Miss Greeves wasn't there to listen to it all, thought Miss Cliffe, looking round. That was something.

"Oh, Miss Cliffe, how good of you to come up," Mrs. Lancaster was saying. "You didn't mind my asking you, did you? You're always so kind. And it's always such a treat to have a little talk with you. Now sit here by the fire.

Are you *sure* you're comfortable? Let me get you a footstool. . . ."

Sweet as sugar, thought Miss Cliffe sardonically. "Never an unkind word to anyone," said the people who admired her. . . . Well, it paid her to be sweet. She'd learned how to get everything she wanted by it. . . . She was a selfish, obstinate old woman for all her pretty looks and ways. . . . But already the room was having its familiar effect upon Miss Cliffe—the photograph of Sir Dudley Merridew in court dress, of Lady Merridew with the two grooms, the painting of Ritherden Manor, the beautiful old furniture. There wasn't any denying that it *did* give tone to the house. And Mrs. Lancaster always let her show it to prospective guests.

"This is one of the bedrooms. It's occupied by a resident. It shows you how comfortable they can be made. . . ." And they looked at the photographs on the mantelpiece, and suddenly their whole attitude changed. They forgot to put their noses in the air and say that it wasn't the sort of place they were accustomed to. A visit to Mrs. Lancaster's room had often secured a wobbling guest.

Miss Furmore's people had been quite as good as Mrs. Lancaster's, but her room contained no relic of them. It was simply a bedroom as provided by the "Club" without any attempt at embellishment. There were no photographs displayed, no paintings of ancestral mansions. She had some family photographs in a drawer, and she took them away with her on her visits and presumably put them out in her bedroom when she stayed at country houses, but it was as if she scorned to expose them to the Belgravia Ladies' Residential Club. Miss Cliffe had rather a weakness for Miss Furmore. She was generally months behind with her rent, and she did not even pretend to appreciate the Belgravia Ladies' Residential Club, but Miss Cliffe somehow preferred her bitterness and discontent to Mrs. Lancaster's complacent sweetness.

"You're looking so tired, my dear," Mrs. Lancaster was saying. "I noticed it at dinner. Let me give you a cup of tea. There's plenty in the teapot, it's only just been made."

She went to the corner cupboard, her graceful blue silk *négligé* floating about her, and got out another cup. "You work far too hard, you know. *Far* too hard. You take such trouble over everything. There! That'll do you good. And will you have a biscuit?"

"No, thank you."

Miss Cliffe drank the tea quickly as if to show Mrs. Lancaster that she had not wanted it and so need not feel grateful for it. Stewed and tea-leafy, she commented to herself with an obscure satisfaction.

"The house is quite full now, isn't it?" Mrs. Lancaster was saying.

Now we're coming to it, thought Miss Cliffe.

"Not quite," she said.

"Full enough," said Mrs. Lancaster. "It's such hard work for you when *every* room's full."

Well, get on to the point, thought Miss Cliffe impatiently. You always go round and round it like this. We both know what you've brought me up here to say.

"Oh, I don't mind hard work," she said.

"You're always so good and kind," purred Mrs. Lancaster. "I thought it was angelic of you to take in that woman tonight just to save her having to go on and find somewhere else at the end of a long journey. But I must say," here she smiled her pretty, disarming smile, "I shall be relieved when she goes on somewhere else tomorrow morning. I take for granted, of course, that that was the understanding."

Miss Cliffe stiffened herself for the fight. She didn't care two pins for the old frump, but, after all, it was her house, not Mrs. Lancaster's. If she didn't make a stand some time, she wouldn't be able to call her soul her own.

"Oh no. There was no understanding of that sort. She just asked for a room, and I let her have it."

"She brought references, I suppose?"

"Oh yes," lied Miss Cliffe, aware that she was a coward.

"And how long is she going to stay here?"

"Only till she's found some work."

"What sort of work is she looking for?" smiled Mrs. Lancaster. "Charing?"

Miss Cliffe flushed faintly as if the insult had been directed at herself.

"I think she wants a post as a housekeeper."

"A housekeeper!" Mrs. Lancaster was convulsed with mirth. "*No! Not really!* Of course that proves it. She must be mad."

"Nonsense, Mrs. Lancaster!"

"My dear, if you'd heard her a minute ago, talking to herself, or rather shouting, you wouldn't say 'Nonsense!' None of our lives are safe while that woman's in the house. If I were you, I'd send for the police tomorrow. Heaven knows where she's come from."

"She seems quite respectable, and I really don't see why she shouldn't stay," said Miss Cliffe defiantly. She knew that it was a mistake to speak defiantly to Mrs. Lancaster. She ought to be calm and sure of herself. But the woman riled her so. . .

"You're too kind-hearted, Miss Cliffe," said Mrs. Lancaster with her sweetest smile. "Anyone can take you in. You're the last person who ought to have the task of turning away people who aren't gentlefolk."

Damn her cheek, thought Miss Cliffe savagely.

"Her clothes are certainly queer," she said, trying to speak calmly, "but her accent's all right, and she eats all right. She may be merely eccentric."

She wanted to say, "I suppose you want me to turn away everyone who can't produce a photograph of herself in presentation dress."

Then there came a sound of laughter and scuffling on the stairs. The typists were coming home from the pictures. Mrs. Lancaster shrugged faintly. The shrug was intended to remind Miss Cliffe that she had asked her more than a week ago to get rid of the typists.

"There's no profit at all," said Miss Cliffe, replying to the unspoken reminder, "unless I keep the house fairly full."

She thought: I'd give my soul to be able to say, "They pay more than you do, anyway."

"Well, Miss Cliffe," said Mrs. Lancaster suavely, "I should simply hate to have to go anywhere else, because I've really come to look on this as home, though at one time it would have seemed quite impossible. But you must understand how important it is for me to have quiet and restful surroundings. Really, with this woman shouting aloud in her bedroom, and those girls giggling on the staircase at all hours of the night, you must admit that it's hardly restful. And I *know* you'll understand that—well, to put it frankly—that one can only feel *really* at home in a place where one has people who are more or less" (a slight accent on the less) "one's social equals around one. Think it over, Miss Cliffe. I've always found you so very kind and reasonable." She rose, still smiling, holding the blue wrapper about her with a slim white hand on which two diamond rings glittered. "Now I mustn't keep you, because I know how tired you are. Good night, my dear."

Miss Cliffe found herself outside in the corridor, trembling with indignation. Sending for her, giving her a good dressing down, then dismissing her as if she were a servant. Well, she'd gone too far this time. Issuing ultimatums like that. . . On an impulse of defiance she knocked at Miss Tracy's door.

"Come in."

Heavens, what a nightgown! It reminded her of her grandmother, whom she had once seen in bed when she was a little girl.

"Are you quite comfortable, Miss Tracy? Have you everything you want?"

She raised her voice slightly, hoping that Mrs. Lancaster could hear the question in the next room. Her eyes travelled again over Euphemia's ungainly figure. There was something large and generous and wholesome about the woman. Something, strangely enough, that was almost attractive.

Miss Cliffe's impulse of defiance upheld her as she went back along the landing to the staircase. She would take whom she liked as guest in her own house, and if Mrs. Lancaster didn't approve, she could go. . . But, as she

descended the staircase, her defiance gradually evaporated. She was not a snob, she told herself, but, after all, Mrs. Lancaster's parents had been Sir Dudley and Lady Merri-dew. She might take in guests for twenty more years and never get another who could display a photograph of her father in court dress. It *did* give the house tone, there was no denying it. The typists were going in any case, and it would be foolish to lose Mrs. Lancaster for the sake of the old frump who had arrived tonight. Reluctantly, she admitted that Mrs. Lancaster's attitude was partly justified. She would give the woman a hint to go tomorrow. And, if she didn't take the hint, she would tell her that the room was wanted for someone else. . .

She reached her office and closed the door. Here was her castle, her refuge. Her anger against Mrs. Lancaster began to rise again. She took up the evening paper in order to try to forget her, and in a few minutes was lost in a murder case that had opened that day in Putney. Arsenic and an ailing wife. There was not the slightest doubt in Miss Cliffe's mind that it was the husband who had administered the poison. Her spirits rose unaccountably as she read it. Always considered a most affectionate husband. Husbands who poisoned their wives were generally that sort. Another woman, too. Oh, not the slightest doubt of it. . . The clock struck eleven. Miss Cliffe laid aside the paper and went to the lounge, whose occupants had all departed to bed some time ago. She straightened the chairs, beat up the cushions, then knelt in front of the dying fire, carefully salvaging the pieces of coal that were not burnt through. She performed all these duties automatically, absent-mindedly. Her mind was busy with the murder at Putney. The husband had certainly done it. . . . They'd get him in the end. Oh yes, they'd get him in the end. He was beginning to contradict himself already. Her depression and irritation had vanished completely. The fierce exhilaration of the chase possessed her.

In the room on the other side of Euphemia's, Miss Furmore sat at the table writing a letter.

DEAREST CELIA,

I had a splendid time with George and Susan, but I'm back in this foul hole again. Did you mean what you said about my paying you a visit this summer? Because, if you did, would the beginning of June suit you?

She stopped and bit her lip, frowning into space, the hand that held the fountain-pen poised motionless over the paper. Had she really come to this? In the old days it had been a case of fitting in her innumerable invitations so that they should not clash with each other, not blatantly cadging for them like this. Why wasn't she waiting for Celia herself to follow up the very casual invitation she had thrown out at that chance meeting in December? She smiled twistedly as she answered herself. Because she was pretty sure that, unless nailed down, Celia would not follow it up. She was growing older, and her friends were tiring of her. They liked to have younger, gayer people at their parties. The knowledge of her background of poverty depressed them. Her lips twisted again. At any rate they couldn't say that she came among them as the "poor relation." She had to choose between living in a decent place but appearing among them as the "poor relation," and living in a place like this but being as well turned-out as the best of them. It grew more difficult each year, of course. Investments that had paid enough for her to live on in moderate comfort when her father died were inexplicably paying less and less. Well, it might be worse. As long as she could go back to the old world, the world into which she had been born, for the greater part of the year, she could endure it. There she could forget everything but the ease and luxury around her. She could be perfectly content without looking backward or forward.

She glanced at the beginning of her letter. "I'm back in this foul hole again." So she'd sunk to that, too. When first she came here, she had taken pains to hide where she stayed in London between her visits. Now she used it to play on their pity. Well, it was worth it if it made Celia clinch that invitation. Celia was very tender-hearted.

Her eyes, deep-set and beautiful in her haggard face, gazed unseeingly in front of her. What would happen when she grew so old that people didn't ask her to stay with them any more? She wouldn't be like that smug little cat of a Lydia Lancaster, anyway—so pleased with herself, so flattered by the toadying of the unspeakable creatures who lived in this place. There had been a particularly unspeakable specimen there tonight. She always felt a malicious joy when a particularly unspeakable specimen came to the Club because of the nasty jar it must give Lydia Lancaster, who tried to persuade herself that it was a "superior" place with "superior" guests. . .

If she went to Celia's she would need a lot of new things. She ought to get Bolton's dividend next week. Bolton's went on paying, anyway. She'd ask Miss Cliffe to let her account stand over till she came back. It was so essential that she should be smartly turned-out on these visits. If once her fellow guests began to look down on her. . .

She took up her pen again and went on with the letter in her large, bold handwriting.

"It would be heavenly to see you and Humphrey and those adorable children again. . ."

In the room next to Miss Furmore's Mrs. Lewes stood looking down at her bed, which was covered with little articles trimmed with crochet work. The elaborate "front" reposed on the dressing-table, and its owner, bereft of the few additional inches it lent to her, looked curiously short and stout. Her scanty grey hair just touched the shoulders of her thick, serviceable, camel's hair dressing-gown. Her gaze wandered proudly over face towels edged with crochet work, tray cloths edged with crochet work, table cloths edged with crochet work, a dressing-table cover wholly composed of crochet work, chair backs, chair arms, doyleys, table centres. She surveyed them as a general might survey his forces. They would make a splendid show at the Sale of Work in the summer. Dolly would be delighted with them. . . She saw herself standing behind the fancy stall in the Vicarage garden, while Dolly and her

husband (who always looked so nice in his neat, grey clerical suit) welcomed people and played host and hostess, and Derek and Beatrice, like the darlings they were, ran about doing errands for everyone.

The thought of Dolly brought with it a fierce, exultant throb of pride. No other mother had ever had such a daughter—so pretty and charming and clever and kind and good. And Hugh, though, of course, inferior to her in every way, was a good husband. It always thrilled Mrs. Lewes to remember that they had asked her to live with them when they married. She had refused ("No, young people are best alone"), but the thought that they had asked her had been a great solace to her in those first black days when she had missed Dolly so unbearably. Every summer Mrs. Lewes went to stay for a month at the country Vicarage that was now Dolly's home, and during that month the annual Sale of Work in aid of Church Expenses was held in the Vicarage garden. All the rest of the year was to Mrs. Lewes merely a prelude to that visit, and the culminating point of the visit was the Sale of Work, when she stood behind the fancy stall, stocked with her own crochet work that everyone admired so much, watching Dolly and Hugh and Derek and Beatrice with a pride that was almost more than she could bear. She thought of the rest of the year as a sort of hill . . . a slow and wearisome ascent till she reached the top, which was the half way between her visits to Dolly, then the descent as, month by month, week by week, day by day, the visit grew nearer again. The seven days of the week were rather like that, too. Friday was her gala day, because on Friday she received Dolly's letter, and once Friday was over the days were just a waiting for the next week's letter, a toiling up the hill of Saturday, Sunday, Monday, till on Tuesday seemed to begin the slow but pleasant descent that brought her to the next Friday. The mantelpiece, dressing-table, and chest of drawers of her bedroom were covered with framed snapshots of Dolly and Hugh and Derek and Beatrice. To Mrs. Lewes, the other guests of the Belgravian Ladies' Residential Club existed only as audiences

of her week's news of Dolly and Hugh and Derek and Beatrice.

Occasionally she would ask one of them into her bedroom to show her the photographs and the stock of fancy work, and always on Friday, when she heard from Dolly, she would tell the latest news about her to anyone who would listen. She was hardly conscious of the person to whom she was talking. It was simply that she *had* to talk to someone about Dolly. She was dimly aware that there was a new guest this evening, and already she had half-unconsciously marked her down as the recipient of the next budget of news from Dolly. Newcomers were always more ready to listen to her. Residents of long standing had a way of avoiding her or cutting her short when she wanted to tell them the latest news about Dolly and the children.

She began to gather up the pieces of fancy work and replace them in the big cardboard box where she kept them. Only a few months now before her next visit. It would be a rather quiet visit this year, of course, because Dolly was expecting another baby in the summer. She had not told anyone in the Club about that yet. She had a box full of baby clothes on which she worked in her bedroom with loving pride between her afternoon nap and tea. When she had put away the crochet work, she went over to the little writing-table by the window. On it were framed snapshots of Dolly and Hugh in the garden, of Derek on his fairy cycle, of Beatrice and Derek on the swing, and of Dolly and Hugh sitting on a garden seat with Derek and Beatrice on the grass in front of them. She had written to Dolly yesterday, and she had nothing fresh to tell her, but she could not go to bed without writing to her again.

MY DARLING (she wrote),

I hope you are taking care of yourself. If I were you I'd let the spring cleaning go altogether this year. Be particularly careful not to lift anything heavy down from above your head or anything like that. I know you laugh at me for writing all these fussy letters! So I won't fuss any more. I've just been looking at my work and I find I've

nearly done enough things to stock the Fancy Stall already. I do hope that we have as fine a day for it as we had last year. . .

The vivacious little lady up for the Sales was also writing a letter in her bedroom. She was writing to a school friend whom she had not seen for years and who lived with an invalid aunt in the country as her unpaid companion. She always enjoyed writing to this particular school friend.

DEAR JOAN,

I'm up in 'Town for a week having a very gay time. 'This is a very nice place, quiet and much more select than a hotel. A Mrs. Lancaster, who is Sir Dudley Merridew's daughter, is in a room just near mine. . . .

Up the flight of stairs at the end of the passage the two typists were making tea over a gas stove in the large attic bedroom that they shared.

"Everyone gone to bed," said one. "Isn't it a dead-alive place! I wonder we've stuck it so long."

"Well, let's give notice tomorrow and go to that place Effie lives at. 'The one down the road."

"Right-o. I'm game. I'm sick of these old stick-in-the-muds Her Majesty the Countess of Lancaster and the rest of them."

"They have dances every Saturday night at Effie's place, and the residents can ask their friends. 'They're nearly all young—not like these fossils. Why not clear out tomorrow? Or would the old bird make us stump up a week's money?"

"Look out, it's boiling."

"Get the biscuits, you lazy blighter. What about milk? Where's the tin we opened last night? . . . Yes, let's clear off tomorrow. No time like the present. It can't be worse than this, anyway. You'd go a long way before you'd find another collection like this." She suddenly gave a scream of reminiscent delight. "I say, wasn't the new one that came tonight priceless?"

She sat forward in her chair, puffing out her cheeks and

making her eyes bulge, trying to reproduce the expression of naïve interest with which Euphemia had watched the occupants of the lounge after dinner. It wasn't really in the least like Euphemia, but they laughed hilariously, holding their sides and rolling about the room till there came a plaintive tapping on the wall from the room next door, which Miss Greeves occupied.

VIII

EUPHEMIA opened the door of the Belgravia Ladies' Residential Club and stood for a moment in the hall, listening. From the dining-room came a faint clatter of dishes and murmur of voices. Everywhere else silence. . . She glanced at the clock. Quarter to eight. They were having dinner, of course. She was late.

Her thoughts travelled back over the day.

She had set off directly after breakfast, bought a morning paper, and marked all the advertisements for housekeepers that she could find in it. She had no idea where the places mentioned in the advertisements were, but she soon discovered that policemen were always ready to help. Her admiration for policemen increased steadily as the day wore on, and one after another came to her rescue, patiently studying her crumpled list of addresses and giving her directions and advice.

They were in her eyes godlike creatures—magnificently omniscient, majestically paternal. She saw one of them lying in bed in father's place, kind, benignant, gloriously tolerant of the weaknesses of the inferior beings around him, and thought with a sigh how different it would all have been.

It gave her the thrill of the successful explorer to run her addresses to earth. And the houses themselves—the elegance, the luxury, the sheer magnificence of them—took away her breath. Even the Belgravia Ladies' Residential Club was nothing compared with the flat in Kensington where they wanted a working housekeeper (an expression that slightly puzzled Euphemia, who didn't

see how a housekeeper could be anything but working) and where the curtains were of gold shot with blue, and the walls panelled with cream-painted wood. The actual interviews were in every case the least satisfactory part of the journey. The interviewers flicked her over with keen, swift glances that began at the unspeakable hat, passed down the creased black serge suit, and ended with the patched shoes. Then, very kindly, very distantly, they said that they were afraid she would not do. She tried to tell them that she had kept house for father for more than twenty years, but they did not even listen. "I'm afraid it's no use. I'm so sorry you've had the trouble of coming here."

She had lunch (a cup of coffee and a sausage roll) at a coffee-stall in a back street in Kensington. A couple of navvies were having lunch there too. One of them began to talk to her about Socialism. She wasn't interested in Socialism, but she was interested—passionately interested—in his wife, who, he said, suffered from continual sore throat. She told him to tell his wife to chop an onion into tiny pieces, wrap it up in muslin and sleep with it round her neck.

"I've never known it fail," she said earnestly.

He promised to tell his wife about it and added that they had "five kids, who kept her on the go all right." Replying to Euphemia's queries about the children, he told her that the baby was as fine a child as had ever been born and "so ole-fashioned—well, me and the missis 'old our sides laughin' at 'im," but the eldest was a "terror . . . we dunno what to do with 'im sometimes, an' that's the truth."

"You must have patience with children," Euphemia counselled him, "and must try to understand them. They're like flowers. They've got to grow in their own way, and, if you try to make them to grow in some other way, you spoil them."

They discussed this question for some minutes, then Euphemia, growing confidential, told him that she had come to London to look for work as a housekeeper. He

wished her good luck, adding that his mother had been a housemaid in the country. They parted on excellent terms.

"Now would you say," said the coffee-stall keeper meditatively as he watched her retreating figure, "that she was a toff gone batty, or what?"

"I dunno whether she's a toff or not," said the navvy, drawing his sleeve across his mouth and handing his cup to be refilled, "it's 'ard to tell these days. But she ain't batty."

Euphemia decided not to apply for any more house-keeper's posts. She took herself to task for even having thought of it. "A general servant's more in your line," she said severely.

She studied the advertisements for general servants. The one at Golders Green was the most attractive. The duties included "Help with four children." Euphemia hoped that one of the four would be a baby. . .

The woman who opened the door to her was obviously the mistress of the house, though her overall was soiled, her hair coming down, and her forehead decorated by a smear of boot polish. She showed Euphemia through a hall that seemed to have been prepared for an obstacle race, with a pile of rugs, a bucket of coals, and a large dust pan set at intervals, into a small stuffy drawing-room, heavy with the odour of the moribund flowers that drooped from a cheap glass vase on the mantelpiece.

"Sit down," said the woman wearily.

She threw her tired eyes over Euphemia's large, stalwart body, and a gleam of hope came into them. The dreadful hat, the creased serge costume, the patched shoes, meant nothing to her. She saw through them to brawn and muscle that could carry coals and scrub floors and dust and sweep and scour, that could take its part in the unceasing battle against dirt and disorder that makes up a housewife's life.

Moreover, there was something solidly frumpish and unattractive-looking about the applicant that precluded the idea of "flightiness." This woman, whatever her other faults, would not want to be going to the pictures with young men every night, wearing silk stockings and high heels, as her last "general" had done.

"You've got references, of course?" she said.

Euphemia was taken aback. None of the others had reached the point of asking for references.

She considered the question for the first time.

"N-no," she admitted. "You see, I was nursing my father."

"Yes," said the woman, "but surely you can refer me to someone who knew your father."

"It was right in the country," said Euphemia lamely.

"The vicar of the place would give you a reference, I suppose?"

Euphemia reflected again. How could she ask the vicar—or indeed anyone—for a reference after her flight? She remembered the vicar's gentle congratulations by her father's grave. His sympathies would be with George. He would think that she had behaved very badly, as—Euphemia admitted to herself with a sudden twinkle in her brown eyes—of course she had.

"I don't think so," she said.

The hopelessness returned to the woman's voice.

"I'm sorry," she said, "but my husband said particularly that I wasn't to get anyone without a reference. The last one I got without a reference went off with the children's money boxes."

"I shouldn't do that," Euphemia assured her.

"Well, I'm sorry, but I'm afraid it's no use," said the woman, rising.

Euphemia went out into the little dark hall, stumbled over the pile of rugs, skirted the coal bucket and dust pan, and emerged at last into the sunny street. The woman stood at the window and watched her as she walked away.

"She looks all right," she said, "but there must be something. Drink, I expect."

Euphemia made her way to Hyde Park and sat down there for a few minutes to consider the situation. The interview had brought her up sharply against the question of references. Strange that she hadn't thought of them before. Everyone would want references. . . Except—probably

people wouldn't want them from charwomen and office cleaners, and there must be lots of jobs of that sort. She could not go on living at the Belgravia Ladies' Residential Club, of course, but then she had not meant to go on living there in any case. She would get a room somewhere. A policeman was walking down the path towards her. Euphemia had come to look upon the police as the representatives of Providence upon earth. She went up to him and laid her problem before him. Judicial, unperturbed, he considered it.

"You could get a small room for about six or seven shillings a week," he said, "if you didn't mind stairs, of course; the higher the cheaper, you know" (Euphemia informed him hastily that she didn't mind stairs), "and it wouldn't be a good neighbourhood. You pay for the neighbourhood, of course. And there wouldn't be any waiting thrown in. But that's about the cheapest you could get—a small attic room in a poor neighbourhood at six or seven shillings a week. There may not be many on the market, but I know people who pay that and are comfortable. And an office cleaner ought to get about a pound a week. So if you got a job in that line and have only yourself to keep you could run to a better room, of course, than the one I've been telling you about."

"Would they want references?" said Euphemia. "The office people, I mean?"

"They might and they mightn't," said the policeman guardedly. "I expect a lot of them wouldn't bother." Then he wished her good luck and strolled majestically onward, giving no further thought to her. It was all in the day's work. Stranger people consulted him on stranger problems every day. As he walked, he threw interested glances at the borders on either hand. The bulbs were coming on well. His mind went to his own garden. He had never done so well with his sweet peas as he had done last year. He must try to beat his own record. . . Sow them in the autumn in pots in ashes, take care to keep the tap root uninjured when planting them out, and "pinch" them back when they started growing—those were the secrets. Like

most of his colleagues, he was a finished man of the world, acquainted with every possible aspect of human nature, tolerant, kindly, poised, and imperturbable. The only thing that could rouse him to any enthusiasm was the back garden of the small five-roomed house in Peckham that was his home.

Euphemia walked on briskly. Already her imagination was engaged in cleaning offices as offices had never been cleaned before. Already the geranium was installed on the window-sill of a tiny attic room. The curtains were of blue-and-white check cotton like the curtains of the cottage, there was a blue-and-white check cloth on the table, a basket chair before the little fire. But—she curbed her growing enthusiasm. She might not be able to get a job as an office cleaner. People might insist on a reference even from an office cleaner. There must be something in the world for which you didn't need a reference. She remembered the women whom she had seen at intervals, in her journeyings of that day, sitting on the pavements behind baskets of flowers. *They* did not need references. They just bought flowers and sold them again. Anyone could do that. . . Her enthusiasm sprang up again like an unquenchable flame as she took her stand in imagination behind a piled basket of carnations and roses. She plied a busy trade and watched with zest the unending stream of humanity that passed and repassed her. A hunger for life—life so long denied her—filled every fibre of her being.

She stood motionless in the hall for some moments considering the situation. She could not go into dinner without changing, of course. She would slip upstairs, change into the blue flannel dress, and come down as quickly as she could. Perhaps if they had finished dinner Miss Cliffe would let her have some bread and cheese. Staircase and landing were silent and deserted. She reached her bedroom and sat down in the easy chair.

She became aware suddenly and for the first time that she was tired, aware that to get out of the chair would need a conscious effort. She made the effort at once and

went to her dressing-table to take off her hat. She did not realise that she had left her bedroom door ajar, but suddenly in the reflection in the mirror she saw a man slip by the small aperture. Then, very, very quietly, she heard the door of Mrs. Lancaster's room open. Her thoughts flashed at once to the story that her imagination had woven round Mrs. Lancaster last night. The son had returned to find his mother and to take her back to the ancestral mansion. He did not know, of course, that Mrs. Lancaster would be down at dinner. She went out on to the landing and came face to face with him as he slunk out of Mrs. Lancaster's bedroom. And at once the story she had made up about him became a ridiculous and impossible fiction. This was no son come to restore Mrs. Lancaster to Ritherden Manor. This was a thief.

For a second they stood facing each other in the narrow passage. Then the man gathered himself together and made a sudden spring. His evident intention was to thrust her out of the way and run down the stairs to the open front door.

Instinctively and without a moment's hesitation Euphemia closed with him. They struggled fiercely and in silence on the little landing. He caught her wrists. . . She wrenched them free. They closed and wrestled. She was pitting muscle against muscle, skill against skill. She had forgotten whom she was fighting and why. It never occurred to her to call for help. A strange, intoxicating excitement possessed her. A primitive lust for battle filled her veins with fire.

The man flung her against the wall, but she recovered and caught him again as he was slipping past her.

He freed himself with an effort and hit out at her blindly. She caught his wrists, and they swayed tensely to and fro. There was no sound but the sound of their heavy breathing. Suddenly he shot out his leg and tripped her up. She fell backwards on to the landing, but, even as she fell, caught at his foot as he tried to pass her again. He came crashing down on top of her. . .

It was at this point that a housemaid, hearing strange

sounds from above, came upstairs to investigate them. She stood for a second at the bend of the staircase, rigid and open-mouthed, then uttered scream after piercing scream. Miss Cliffe rushed upstairs, followed by Mrs. Lancaster, Miss Greeves, and the other guests.

And there the amazing spectacle met them of Euphemia, her hair falling in disorder about her face, her cheeks flushed, her eyes shining, kneeling on the prostrate figure of a man. She looked up at Miss Cliffe, and immediately the man, aware of the relaxing of the pressure of her knee, sprang to his feet with a quick movement. Euphemia grabbed at his coat collar; deftly he slipped his arms from their sleeves and plunged down the stairs and out into the street.

"Catch him!" said Euphemia feebly.

Then she put her hand into the pocket of the coat and brought out a string of pearls, a diamond ring, an emerald brooch, and a large, old-fashioned ruby pendant—the entire contents, in fact, of Mrs. Lancaster's jewel case.

"Where is she?" said Mrs. Lancaster irritably.

"Downstairs, having something to eat," said Miss Cliffe. "There's no doubt at all that he'd have got off with the things if she hadn't happened to be there."

"It's all *most* annoying," said Mrs. Lancaster. "I feel thoroughly upset by it. I shall never forget the sight of her kneeling on the man looking like a mad woman."

"She saved your jewels," said Miss Cliffe with quiet enjoyment.

She was enjoying the sight of Mrs. Lancaster's discomfiture. She was thinking: You can't very well insist on my turning her out *now*.

"I really feel that I don't know *what's* happened," said Mrs. Lancaster petulantly. "The woman springs up from nowhere, and the next thing we find is her struggling in a perfectly disgusting fashion with this man for the jewels. What was she doing up there at that time, in any case?"

"She'd come back late and had gone up to take off her things."

"Of course," said Mrs. Lancaster sarcastically. "A perfectly reasonable explanation. I remember seeing a play once in which a woman went to steal some jewels, found a man already in the act of stealing them, struggled with him for them, and then, when the owner returned in the middle, pretended that she'd been trying to stop the man from stealing them."

Miss Cliffe smiled again. It was not given to many people to see Mrs. Lancaster making a fool of herself, and she was treasuring every minute of it. The memory would be a solace to her when Mrs. Lancaster was again sweet and glacial and imperturbable and immeasurably superior.

"There's no possibility of anything like that," said Miss Cliffe. "I'm afraid that there is no doubt at all that Doris got a wax impression of the key of your jewel case for the man. She disappeared from the house immediately before it happened. Either they'd arranged that she should go, or she was frightened of being suspected. Anyway, I'm sure we shan't see her again."

"It's *most* odd," said Mrs. Lancaster petulantly, "and that is all I can say about it."

"You ought to keep them at the Bank," said Miss Cliffe. "Things like that are always a temptation to maids."

"They wouldn't be in a properly conducted house," snapped Mrs. Lancaster. "And such a *sight* the woman looked!"

In spirit Miss Cliffe was dancing and singing about the room. They would neither of them ever forget this interview. Peevish, silly, and ungenerous. And the best of it was that the woman *knew* she was being all these things and couldn't stop. She might as well rub it in a bit more while she was about it.

"Oh, with regard to what you were saying last night, Mrs. Lancaster. . . I meant to speak to Miss Tracy this morning, but I found that she'd gone out immediately after breakfast, and, of course, she came in late this evening. But I suppose that after what's just happened you don't want me to tell her to go."

But Mrs. Lancaster had suddenly recovered herself. Her

face wore its usual expression of placid sweetness. The blue eyes stared at Miss Cliffe in serene amazement.

"I don't know what you mean, Miss Cliffe. You must have quite misunderstood me, if you thought that I'd asked you to tell her to go. I merely said that I objected to her shouting in her bedroom, but Miss Greeves has spoken to her about it, and I don't suppose that there will be any more trouble. . . My dear Miss Cliffe, I really hope that I've learnt by now to mix with people of all classes without complaining."

Getting catty, thought Miss Cliffe, still with satisfaction. I'd better go. She rose.

"Well, Mrs. Lancaster," she said, "all I can say is that I'm terribly sorry you should have this upset. Is there anything I can do for you?"

"No, thank you," replied Mrs. Lancaster with distant dignity. "Of course, I am *most* grateful to the woman and will reward her suitably. Good night."

"Good night, Mrs. Lancaster," said Miss Cliffe.

Immediately she had gone, Miss Greeves knocked at the door and entered.

Mrs. Lancaster was lying back in her chair with closed eyes.

"Brenda, darling," she said in a voice expressive of patient suffering, "make me a cup of strong tea, there's an angel. I've never been so *humiliated* in my life."

IX

THE next morning, in the intervals of being interviewed by the police, Euphemia took over the work of Doris, the missing chambermaid. Miss Cliffe never quite realised how Euphemia came to take it over, but half an hour after breakfast there she was, wearing the red-and-black check overall, turning out bedrooms, sweeping, dusting, making beds, emptying slops, as if she had been on the staff of the Belgravia Ladies' Residential Club all her life. Miss Cliffe murmured, "You mustn't, Miss Tracy, honestly you mustn't," but her tone was less convincing than she tried to make it. It was impossible to get even a temporary girl at a moment's notice like this, and she had her hands full downstairs. She would have been, as she frequently told herself, "at her wits' end" that morning without Euphemia.

The police had shrewd suspicions who the thief was. He had worked other boarding houses through the maids, and Doris's sudden flight was obviously the result of panic. Their attitude to Euphemia—kind and congratulatory—was a great disappointment to Mrs. Lancaster. As she had said to Miss Greeves the night before, "I'm the last person in the world to harbour unjust suspicions, but I can't help feeling that there's something very queer about the whole thing. Still—if there's a weak spot in her story, I think we may safely leave it to the police to find it."

And the police had proportionately gone down in her estimation by not finding it, by leaving her inconsiderately under an obligation to the woman. She had said to Miss Cliffe that she would reward her suitably, and, of course, she must do it.

She had her breakfast in bed, feeling peevish and irritable. The memory of Euphemia, panting and dishevelled, with her knee firmly planted on the man's chest, kept returning to her, so that finally she closed her eyes with a little shudder and pushed away her egg unfinished. Then Miss Greeves came in and sat on her bed, and was at first irritatingly solicitous and then still more irritatingly tactless, saying "And what are you going to give her, darling?"

"Give her?" said Mrs. Lancaster icily. "My dear Brenda, what do you mean?"

Her dear Brenda flushed, aware that she had blundered. "Oh . . . Miss Cliffe said something about your having said that you'd reward her," she muttered uncomfortably.

"I certainly said that I would reward her and reward her adequately," said Mrs. Lancaster distantly, "but I don't think I mentioned *giving* her anything. Brenda, darling, *please* don't discuss things I've said with Miss Cliffe. I do so hate tittle-tattle. . . And I want to get up now, dear, so would you mind going?"

Miss Greeves crept away miserably. Mrs. Lancaster got out of bed, drew on the pale blue dressing-gown, lit the gas fire (really, Brenda might have thought of doing that), and sat for a minute on the Empire couch, gazing at the photographs on the mantelpiece. The sight of Papa in court dress and Mamma in the dog-cart with the two grooms comforted her slightly, and by the time she had dressed she was almost herself again. As soon as she went out on to the landing, however, she caught a nightmare vision of the woman wearing a red-and-black check overall, carrying a slop pail into the lavatory. She averted her eyes and hastened downstairs.

"Good morning, Mrs. Lancaster," said Miss Cliffe, meeting her half way up the stairs. "I hope you're feeling better."

"I'm afraid I'm still feeling rather upset," said Mrs. Lancaster, "and my egg was under-boiled again."

Then she moved on quickly. She had meant to be sweetly, icily haughty, and she was aware that she had been merely petulant. It was all that hateful woman's

fault. Everything seemed to have gone wrong since she came to the house.

When she reached the bottom of the stairs, a maid who was dusting the hall (Why on *earth* couldn't Miss Cliffe get that done before breakfast? thought Mrs. Lancaster testily) said, "Please 'm, Dr. Marriott rang you up. He wouldn't leave a message. He said perhaps you'd give him a ring when you came down."

"Thank you, Gladys," said Mrs. Lancaster.

She went into Miss Cliffe's office, where the telephone was (that, by the way, was another of Mrs. Lancaster's grievances), and took down the receiver.

"That you, Geoffrey? You rang me up, didn't you?"

"Yes." The cultured voice, pleasant and deferential, restored her suddenly to her right place in the universe. "It seems ages since I saw anything of you. May I take you out sometime?"

Mrs. Lancaster smiled delightfully into the telephone.

"How nice of you, Geoffrey. When?"

"Well, there's no time like the present, is there? Are you doing anything tonight?"

"No."

"What shall we go to?"

"Oh, anything. You know what I like. A play of some sort, but nothing modern."

"I'll take you out somewhere to dinner first, may I?"

"Oh no. You must come here."

There was a perceptible hesitation. Then he said:

"Thanks. That's very kind of you."

"Be here by seven-thirty, then, will you? Good-bye."

She rang off and turned, still smiling, to go out of the room.

Miss Cliffe was just entering it. "Oh, my cousin will be here for dinner tonight, Miss Cliffe," said Mrs. Lancaster, and added graciously, "*Quite* a nice morning, isn't it?"

Mrs. Lancaster was Mrs. Lancaster again.

She went out immediately and was away all morning. When she came in, she went straight to Miss Cliffe's office and greeted her with affectionate effusiveness.

"You ought to be out this lovely day, my dear. . . .

Oh, what I wanted to ask you was—is Miss—what is her name—Trant?—Tranty?—Oh yes, of course, Tracy. Is Miss Tracy indoors anywhere?"

There was a faint amusement—whimsical, benevolent—in her tone as she repeated the name. She was gay and smiling, obviously in her best humour.

"I think so, Mrs. Lancaster," said Miss Cliffe.

"I'd be *so* grateful, my dear," Mrs. Lancaster begged her prettily, "if you'd ask her to step up to my bedroom for a moment."

"Purring all over," commented Miss Cliffe to herself, as she stood in the hall watching the slender, upright figure till it had disappeared round the corner of the stairs, "I wonder what she's up to now."

It took her some time to find Euphemia. Euphemia had put on her hat and coat to sally forth in search of work again, but had met Mrs. Lewes on the landing. Mrs. Lewes had just received her Friday's letter and was brimming over with the week's news of Dolly and Hugh and Derek and Beatrice. She recognised Euphemia as the new guest and immediately began to pour it all out to her. Euphemia was deeply, passionately interested. Mrs. Lewes took her into her bedroom to show her the photographs and to tell her all about them. Euphemia sat on the bed listening, her eyes bright, her lips parted eagerly. She was no longer herself. She was Mrs. Lewes. Dolly was her daughter, Derek and Beatrice her grandchildren. She thrilled with pride when she heard of Derek's having got full marks in the Arithmetic Exam., of his prize for the 220 yards; she drew a quick breath, first of horror and then of relief, when she heard of Beatrice's having been so nearly run over ("She ran straight out of the gate without looking, the little monkey! He only missed her by swerving into the hedge"). As Mrs. Lewes, growing still more confidential under the stimulus of her sympathy, told her the story of their babyhood and childhood, she suffered in all their troubles, she watched by their bedside in all their illnesses, she exulted in their cleverness and adored their baby perfections.

Never had Mrs. Lewes had such an audience. She took out the box in which she kept their letters and gave them to Euphemia to read one by one.

"Only six," said Mrs. Lewes proudly. "I don't think many boys of six could put a letter together like that."

Euphemia was sure that they could not.

"And Beatrice only four. Look—isn't this one sweet? And here are some more snapshots."

Euphemia took them. She wasn't in the dingy little bedroom. She was in the Vicarage garden (the snapshots showed her every corner of it), watching Derek ride round the lawn on his bicycle (there were four snapshots of him doing that), playing "house" and "shop" with Beatrice. . .

Then Mrs. Lewes told her about the third grandchild, who was to arrive in the summer, and, unlocking a cupboard, brought out the box of little garments. Euphemia examined them with large, rough, reverent fingers, holding the robes of lace-trimmed cambric as if cradling a child.

When Miss Cliffe entered, it took Euphemia several moments to drag herself back from the country Vicarage to the Belgravia Ladies' Residential Club.

"Oh, you're here, Miss Tracy," said Miss Cliffe. "Mrs. Lancaster would be glad if you'd kindly go and see her in her room."

"Now?" said Euphemia, feeling dazed by the sudden change of scene.

"Yes."

Euphemia turned to Mrs. Lewes.

"You'll tell me more about them some other time, won't you?" she said timidly.

"Oh yes," said Mrs. Lewes in a far-away voice. Euphemia's interest had made it all so real again that she spoke from the basket chair under the apple tree at the end of the lawn where they always had tea on fine afternoons.

Euphemia slipped away and left Mrs. Lewes pouring out the tea for Dolly (Dolly must be spared all little exertions like that now) and seeing that Derek and Beatrice didn't make too much noise or get quite covered with honey.

She went along the passage to Mrs. Lancaster's room and knocked softly at the door.

"Come in."

As she entered, Mrs. Lancaster rose from her chair and came towards her with hands outstretched.

"How nice of you to come! I've been wanting to speak to you, of course, ever since last night. . . Now sit down here and be comfortable."

She drew a chair forward and motioned Euphemia into it. Euphemia was paralysed by shyness. Her quick, gentle eyes had taken in every mark of former grandeur that the room contained. She was the daughter of the valet and the housemaid, and there had been bred in her a veneration for such things, a veneration that, owing to the sturdy independence her country stock had given her, partook of the nature of loyalty rather than of servility.

Mrs. Lancaster was watching her with a pleasant smile. "My dear, I can never thank you enough for what you did for me last night."

"It wasn't anything," faltered Euphemia.

"Oh, but it was," said Mrs. Lancaster earnestly. "I shall never forget it. Your courage saved some things that were very, very precious to me." (Mrs. Lancaster closed her eyes for a few seconds, trying to shut out the horrid memory of Euphemia with her hair coming down, kneeling on a man's chest.) "Their monetary value meant nothing to me," (Mrs. Lancaster had decided to rub this point in well), "it was their associations that made them valuable. And you saved them for me, my dear. And I'm deeply grateful to you."

Euphemia was thinking: I simply can't believe it, it's too wonderful. *Her* talking like that to *me*. To *me*. I've never known *anyone* so kind.

Glamorous pictures flashed across Euphemia's mind in which she saved Mrs. Lancaster from death or discovered a will that restored to her again the palatial mansion and all its treasures. Then, of course, Mrs. Lancaster made her the housekeeper of the palatial mansion, and sometimes, when Mrs. Lancaster's maid was out, she helped Mrs. Lan-

caster to dress for dinner, arranging pearls and a rose in the pretty grey hair. She had a nice little housekeeper's room with the geranium in a pot on the window-sill, and she was very busy all day long, handing out household supplies, superintending and training maids, mending, washing beautiful old lace and china that no one else was allowed to touch. Gazing at the painting of Ritherden Manor, she saw every room in it as clearly as if the walls had suddenly melted away, knew the details of each room down to the smallest ornament, heard her mother saying, "And the dining-room opened off from the hall on the right. It was panelled with oak and they could sit forty at the big dining-table. . . ." All big houses were Haydon Court to Euphemia. . .

"You're looking at the picture of my old home," smiled Mrs. Lancaster; "it's one of my greatest treasures." (How *stupid* the woman was, gaping like that. . .)

"But to return to the present," she went on suavely. "As I said before, I can't possibly thank you for what you did for me. I shall always look upon you as a friend now." (One must do the thing in style, thought Mrs. Lancaster wearily. . . . *Noblesse oblige*. And if she tries to presume on it afterwards—well, it will be quite easy to freeze her off.)

It's really happening, thought Euphemia. She's really talking like this to me. I'm really sitting here among all her beautiful things and being told that she'll always look on me as a friend. . . .

But Mrs. Lancaster was speaking again in her charming, musical voice.

"Now they say that one good turn deserves another, don't they, Miss Tracy? So I've been out all this morning trying to do my good turn back. And I *think* that I've succeeded."

Euphemia gazed at her bewildered, and Mrs. Lancaster went on in the tone of voice in which one tells a child of a forthcoming treat.

"I've been to see a friend of mine who is responsible for a beautiful old house in the country where twenty or so women live in ease and, I might almost say, luxury. You

came up to London to look for work, didn't you, Miss Tracy?"

"Yes," said Euphemia, still bewildered.

"Well, the good news I have for you is that you needn't worry over that any more. To cut a long story short, my friend has consented to take you into the house I told you of. That means a comfortable home for you for life and a nice little income, because each of the inmates is given twenty-five pounds a year for pocket money. She's had to stretch a point because it's really meant for women who are older than you" (*and who can be described as gentlewomen*, added Mrs. Lancaster caustically to herself), "but it was her mother who left this house and the money to keep it up, and so she, as trustee, has full authority and can say who is to be admitted and who is not. As a favour to me she's going to stretch a point in your case. You may move in as soon as you can manage it. Tomorrow if you like. And your comfort for life is secured. There's a garden that is almost a show place, the inmates have pleasant bed-sitting-rooms, and there is a large sunny dining-room and a beautiful drawing-room six times the size of this room."

But Euphemia was still looking bewildered.

It's an asylum she needs, thought Mrs. Lancaster, losing her poise again for a second.

"I don't understand," said Euphemia.

"It's quite simple," said Mrs. Lancaster, trying to keep the edge from her voice (the woman ought to have been *weeping* with gratitude by now), "it means that instead of having to work for your living you'll be able to live in comfort in a beautiful home."

Half-witted, of course. A good thing she'd got Miriam Twemlow's promise before she saw her.

"But—I *want* to work for my living," said Euphemia. "It's what I—I mean——"

Her voice trailed off unhappily. She wanted to tell Mrs. Lancaster about father and the long dreary years of servitude to him, about George, and her sudden all-illuminating knowledge that Life lay before her. . .

"Surely, Miss Tracy," Mrs. Lancaster's voice was sweetly, caressingly persuasive, "surely you understand what a wonderful opportunity this is. Thousands of women in your position, literally *thousands*, would almost give their souls for it. Just think of it."

Euphemia thought of it—saw herself sitting with the twenty or so other women in the beautiful drawing-room, and at the table in the large sunny dining-room, saw herself wandering with them round the garden that was almost a show place. The picture filled her with a depression that bordered on panic. She wanted terribly to please Mrs. Lancaster, but—she'd only been out of prison for two days, and she simply couldn't walk straight into it again.

"I think it so kind of you," she faltered, "but ---"

"What sort of work are you thinking of getting, Miss Tracy?" said Mrs. Lancaster.

"I'm trying to get a post as housekeeper," said Euphemia, "but, of course, I haven't any references so I may not be able to. If I can't, I shall get work cleaning out offices or selling flowers in the street."

Mrs. Lancaster's lip curled.

"But, my dear Miss Tracy, *surely* you don't prefer an existence like that to a life of leisure and comfort in this house I've just described to you?"

"Yes, I do," said Euphemia, still unhappily. "I'm sorry, and I think you've been very, very kind, and I'm more grateful to you than I can say, but ---" she wanted Mrs. Lancaster to understand. "You see," she began eagerly, then her voice trailed away again. Mrs. Lancaster was watching her with coldly surprised blue eyes. Mrs. Lancaster would never understand about father and George and the opening of the prison doors. She would never understand that these two days' freedom had left her in love with Life, drunk with the joy of streets and shops and people, of 'buses and trams and parks and coffee stalls. . .

In the silence, as Mrs. Lancaster, coldly, sweetly judicial, waited for her to speak, she seemed to hear the gate of the beautiful house clang behind her, seemed to

see the twenty or so other women awaiting her in the desolate emptiness of their leisured, comfortable lives.

"No," she said with sudden panic in her voice. "No, I couldn't. I'm sorry, but I couldn't. You don't understand."

Mrs. Lancaster rose. She was angry, but she had herself well in hand. Her face was expressionless, her voice smooth.

"I'm so sorry that you've taken this attitude, Miss Tracy. I'm sure that it's you who don't understand. Think it over, will you? Though I'm afraid that we can't expect my friend to keep her offer open indefinitely. It was, of course, only as a great favour that she made it at all. . . . Good evening, Miss Tracy. And you will think it over, won't you?"

When Euphemia had gone, Mrs. Lancaster drew her delicate brows together. She had lowered herself from her pedestalled aloofness to do this woman a favour, and it had been rudely flung back in her face. She turned her glance to the photographs on the mantelpiece and seemed to hear Papa saying in his loud, deep voice:

"A thankless task trying to help these people. They don't know the meaning of the word gratitude."

The memory comforted and reassured her. She had done all that could possibly be expected of her, anyway, and she could wash her hands of the woman now. If she changed her mind and wanted to come into the Home, she would tell her that it was too late and that the vacancy had been filled. There were, after all, limits to the extent to which one should allow these people to impose on one. Papa had always said so. . . .

X

GEOFFREY MARRIOTT sat in the lounge of the Belgravia Ladies' Residential Club, stirring his coffee reflectively and wondering, as he always wondered on these occasions, why on earth Lydia would never let him take her to a good restaurant before the play. There was something so indescribably dreary about this place. It was hard lines on poor old Lydia having to live here. . .

Lydia Lancaster was his only surviving relative, and he possessed a strong sense of family duty. Had she been well off and in a comfortable home, he would not have troubled himself about her, but, as it was, he tried to take her out to a play or concert every month. He had been passionately in love with her when they were boy and girl, but he had had no money and only very distant prospects, and she had refused him, marrying a financier whose position had turned out to be less sound than it had seemed to be. Later, when she was a widow, she had thrown out slight but unmistakable hints that she was ready to renew their old relationship, but he was then wholly absorbed in his work and had no time or thought to spare from it. For many years now she had been merely a family responsibility that dragged slightly but unceasingly on his conscience, so that he felt guilty if ever he let more than a month go by without having been to see her.

Looking at her as she sat daintily sipping her coffee, he remembered the girl he had been in love with. Somehow he could never believe that Lydia had been that girl. It was as if she had died and Lydia were her mother with whom he kept in touch for her sake.

He glanced round the room again. They were a depressing sight, these women, encased each in her armour of complacent correctness. Why were well-bred women with straitened means always like that? The more straitened their means, the more correct and superior they seemed to become. They filled the room with a sort of deadness.

Mrs. Lancaster was smiling approvingly as her glance wandered over her companion—the tall, aristocratic-looking figure, the perfectly fitting dress clothes, the thin, kindly, rather tired face with its greying hair, hollowed temples, and finely carven but not effeminate features. She liked Geoffrey to visit her at the Belgravia Ladies' Residential Club. Without actually putting the thought into words, she felt that he definitely "placed" her, like the photograph of Papa in court dress and the painting of Ritherden Manor. She liked to remind the other guests occasionally of her social position, and Geoffrey's visits were a more satisfactory way of doing this than any other.

Miss Cliffe came up to take their coffee-cups.

"You know Miss Cliffe, don't you, Geoffrey?" said Mrs. Lancaster in a prettily possessive fashion. "She's our good fairy here. Nothing's too much trouble for her. I'm always telling her to spare herself more."

Geoffrey Marriott shook hands with Miss Cliffe and drew up a chair for her.

"My cousin's taking me to the revival of *Pinafore* to-night," went on Mrs. Lancaster. "It was the first play I ever saw. . . I went with Dulcie Frankson and her mother, Geoffrey. Do you remember Dulcie? She married Lord Delver."

She's a born snob, thought Miss Cliffe, toadying up to herself all the time. The idea of Mrs. Lancaster toadying up to herself amused Miss Cliffe so much that she responded to her affability with more warmth than usual.

Slowly, gracefully, Miss Furmore trailed through the lounge from the dining-room. She stopped for a moment to shake hands with Dr. Marriott and speak to the little group.

"We don't often have the pleasure of Miss Furmore's

company," said Mrs. Lancaster, the sweetness of her voice edged with a hostility she vainly tried to hide. "She only pays us flying visits. How long is it to be this time, Miss Furmore?"

"Only a fortnight—thank God," said Miss Furmore as, flashing her weary smile at Miss Cliffe, she passed on.

Miss Cliffe thought: It's funny that I'd rather have her saying things like that than Mrs. Lancaster buttering me up.

But she liked the cousin. He was quiet and unaffected. He was talking to her now in a way that made her forget that she was a harassed boarding-house keeper, that made her feel interesting and intelligent and somehow on a level with him, though he was a famous West End nerve specialist.

Miss Greeves was watching the little group from a corner of the lounge, her flat pale face wearing a look of almost comical despondency and resentment. Mrs. Lancaster had never introduced her cousin to Miss Greeves, and Miss Greeves was always very sulky on the days of his visits.

Geoffrey glanced round the room again.

A woman with hennaed hair had just gone out, revealing another woman whom he had not noticed till now. An amazing woman, large and heavy, wearing a dress that, as even he could see, failed to conform with any rules of fashion. But the curious thing was that, whenever he looked away, the figure seemed to change, seemed to become the figure of someone young, eager, vital, so that he had to look at her again to make sure that she really was this heavy-featured, middle-aged woman. Her eyes met his and did not slide discreetly away as the eyes of any other women in the room would have done. They remained fixed on him with frank, impersonal interest, as if they had been the eyes of a child. He was aware of something emanating from her that put to flight the dead correctness of the room, something real and alive and humanising. He had never before seen anyone like her in this boarding-house refuge of Lydia's. He had visited her

in it so often that its atmosphere was as familiar to him as that of his own consulting room—prim, powdered faces; sleek, waved, shingled hair; correct black evening-dresses; veiled antagonism beneath surface cordiality; a tense but secret rivalry for pre-eminence. This woman did not belong to it. She sat watching it as if it had been a scene in a play. There was about her a suggestion of timidity that had nothing of fear in it. He felt a sudden desire to know something about her.

"Who's that woman over by the fireplace?" he said.

Mrs. Lancaster looked at him in amazement.

"Why ever do you want to know?" she said.

"She saved Mrs. Lancaster's jewellery yesterday," put in Miss Cliffe.

Mrs. Lancaster bit her lip and smiled constrainedly. She wished that Miss Cliffe had not brought up that silly story. But Miss Cliffe was now engaged in relating it in quite unnecessary detail, and Mrs. Lancaster again had to enact her part of pretty gratitude.

"It was *splendid* of her . . . *splendid*."

"It was certainly plucky," said Geoffrey. "I wish I'd seen her do it."

Mrs. Lancaster smiled mirthlessly.

"My dear, she looked dreadful. Her hair coming down and her face purple. She made me think of those horrible women who fight each other in slums. And really—you may not believe me—but she looked as if she were actually enjoying it."

"Why not?" he smiled. "Love of fighting's quite a healthy instinct, and there's no reason why it should be confined to the male sex."

"Oh, Geoffrey, how *can* you talk like that! But quite apart from that, she's impossible."

"How?"

"Well, look at her."

"I am looking at her. She looks—real."

"*Real!* What an extraordinary thing to say. . . She's utterly stupid and ungrateful. I took no end of trouble today getting Miriam Twenlow to say she'd take her into

her place at Godalming. I thought she'd *jump* at it. I simply couldn't believe my ears when she refused."

"What place of Miriam Twenlow's?"

"Don't you remember? Her mother left her house in Godalming as a home for decayed gentlewomen."

"She doesn't look decayed."

"And she certainly doesn't look a gentlewoman," said Mrs. Lancaster with a short laugh. "She said she'd rather get work. After all the trouble I'd taken!"

"What sort of work does she want?"

"You'll smile when I tell you. She said that she'd been answering advertisements for a housekeeper. A *housekeeper*!"

"Adrian Host told me yesterday that he was looking for a housekeeper. He asked me to let him know if I heard of one. Why not put her on to it?"

"Adrian Host? Do you mean the novelist?"

"Yes."

"But he's famous. Can you *imagine* him with a housekeeper like that? Look at her."

"I am looking at her," he said again.

"Well, I wouldn't recommend anyone I knew to take her . . ."

She turned to Miss Cliffe.

"Will you see if the car's there, Miss Cliffe?"

Miss Cliffe held the front door open till they had driven off. Then she closed it and stood for a moment in the empty hall. She wasn't really touchy, she assured herself, but whenever Mrs. Lancaster had been talking to her, however pleasantly, she felt as she had been badly snubbed in public. That nice cousin of hers had looked ashamed this evening. "She married Lord Delver." . . . "Will you see if the car's there, Miss Cliffe?" And Miss Tracy. . . In some way that she couldn't describe, Miss Cliffe felt that Mrs. Lancaster's contempt for Miss Tracy had been intended to include herself. "She certainly doesn't look like a gentlewoman." "I wouldn't recommend anyone I knew to take her." Miss Cliffe thought of Miss Tracy in her red-and-black check overall sweeping out the bedrooms and

emptying the slops. She drew in her breath, and her eyes brightened as if a sudden inspiration had come to her.

"Yes, I'll do it," she said aloud. "I'll do it."

Euphemia sat in the almost empty lounge (the guests went to bed very early), thinking over the evening. She was sorry that the two young girls had gone. She had seen them set off down the road before dinner, giggling hilariously, carrying two suit cases and a hat box (Miss Cliffe had not demanded a week's money, after all). Mrs. Lancaster's visitor, however, had quite made up for their absence. Euphemia had heard someone say that he was her cousin and a famous doctor. It had thrilled her to sit and watch him. He belonged to the world of aristocracy that she had always worshipped. He looked kind and clever and good. Moreover, an indefinable suggestion of weariness about him wrung her heart. In her imagination he came to stay with Mrs. Lancaster at Ritherden Manor for a long rest, and Euphemia, as housekeeper, looked after him, feeding him up, cooking appetising little dishes for him, keeping huge log fires burning in his room, making him stay in bed in the mornings. . .

She realised suddenly that she and Miss Beech were the only people left in the lounge, and Miss Beech, realising the same thing at the same moment, at once began to talk to her with bright, crisp flippancy, because, of course, one must be decent to the poor old frump. Then gradually the bright, crisp flippancy departed and Miss Beech—earnest and serious and staid as God had meant her to be—was telling Euphemia about her work.

She had completely forgotten that she was trying to be decent to an old frump. She was conscious only of a radiant sympathy, a burning interest, that made her pour out the troubles and difficulties, the hopes and fears, the little triumphs and failures that made her work the most engrossing thing in the world to her.

The ormolu clock on the mantelpiece struck ten. She started and, with a return to the bright, crisp flippancy, said, "*Aren't* I a naughty little girl talking shop like this?

I'm afraid I've bored you horribly. Now I'm going straight to bye-byes. . . Nightie-night."

And scuttled out of the room in a sort of panic.

Euphemia was just plaiting her thick brown hair when the knock came.

"Come in."

It was Miss Cliffe. She closed the door behind her and stood looking at Euphemia. She was flushed, and her eyes were very bright.

"Are you a gambler, Miss Tracy?" she said.

"No," said Euphemia, "I don't know anything about horses."

"I don't mean that. . . How much money have you?"

"Twenty pounds."

"What I mean is, would you rather spend it all at once on the chance of getting a really good job, or keep it on the surety of getting a poor one?"

Euphemia smiled.

"Spend it all on the chance," she said without a moment's hesitation.

Miss Cliffe drew a deep breath.

"Good!" she said. "Then will you be ready to come out with me at ten tomorrow morning? And bring the money."

XI

EUPHEMIA gazed helplessly at her reflection in the hair-dresser's mirror.

The thick unruly brown hair was now sleek and waved. It had been ruthlessly "thinned" and was dressed in a knot low on her neck.

The effect was to lend her a suggestion of sophistication that made the black serge costume look ridiculously out of place. It reminded Miss Cliffe of a game she had played in her childhood with cards representing the head, body, and legs of various animals. She had delighted in putting a giraffe's head on to a lion's body, a tiger's head on to a camel, and so on. Euphemia's sleek sophisticated head above that terrible crumpled serge costume reminded her forcibly of the kangaroo's head above the bison's body. But she had no time to indulge in fancies. She handed the much-trimmed black straw hat to Euphemia (the hair-dresser's assistant closed her eyes with horror) and hustled her out of the shop.

"Now we'll go to the only place I know," said Miss Cliffe briskly, "where you can get outsize things decently made and not too expensive."

In the 'bus Euphemia sat staring in front of her. She had long ago stopped trying to make this expedition seem real. It was all a strange, fantastic dream . . . going about with Miss Cliffe like this . . . sitting in a palatial apartment in front of an elaborate wash-basin and having her hair first chopped off in clumps, then transformed into someone else's hair.

Miss Cliffe was leading her into a shop now. A man

was taking her measurements. The dream was growing more and more fantastic. The man disappeared, and a woman took his place. The woman and Miss Cliffe took off her skirt (revealing a voluminous striped petticoat) and put on another. They put on a coat. The man reappeared, and he and the woman and Miss Cliffe stood looking at her, frowning, critical, as if she were a picture that they were in the process of painting. Euphemia was wondering whether to tell Miss Cliffe about the dream in the morning. She was not quite sure whether she knew her well enough to tell dreams to her. But surely she'd be amused. *Anyone* would be amused.

"Yes, it fits perfectly," Miss Cliffe was saying. "How much did you say it was?"

"Only ten guineas. It's a bargain."

"We'll have that, then."

Euphemia closed her eyes in agony, then relaxed. That proved it was a dream. People didn't pay ten guineas for costumes in real life. They paid thirty-five shillings.

"We want the old things to be sent," Miss Cliffe was saying, "and we want to get a few more things. I'll have them all brought to this fitting-room, please, from the other departments, because I want to be sure they go with the coat and skirt."

"Certainly," said the man.

He had put his tape measure round his neck, where it hung like a clergyman's stole.

Euphemia, left alone in the little room, began to feel that this was the point where the dream should end, and tried to wake up by blinking her eyes hard and quickly. She remembered having seen in books the phrase, "He pinched himself to see if he was awake," but she had always thought it rather foolish, because, of course, if you pinched yourself in a dream, it would only be a dream pinch and wouldn't wake you up. Still, she tried it—but the queer little room full of looking-glasses still remained. Then the door opened slowly and Miss Cliffe came in, followed by a girl with a pile of blouses over her arm.

Miss Cliffe and the girl took off the black silk blouse

and put on a blouse of fawn satin that fastened high up under her chin and whose front was composed of innumerable tiny tucks. The man with the tape measure had suddenly appeared again.

"That fits perfectly, doesn't it?" said Miss Cliffe.

"Perfectly," said the man, still looking at her as if she were a figure that he was dressing for his window.

"It's three guineas, I think?" said Miss Cliffe to the girl.

Euphemia gave a gasp that she turned hastily into a cough. She need not have troubled to turn it into a cough, however, because not one of the three was taking the slightest notice of her.

"I chose some hats, too, as I was passing through the department," said Miss Cliffe, "and told them to send them here. Oh, here they are."

Another girl appeared with an armful of hats. Euphemia's eyes rested on them with relief. The hats couldn't cost much, anyway. There wasn't any trimming on them to speak of. They would cost less than the black hat, because that was covered with trimming. Five and eleven, probably. They were putting them on to her head one after another in a way that struck Euphemia as strange. Euphemia had been in the habit of wearing her hats perched on the top of her head, supported by the enormous bun and secured by a hatpin that had belonged to her mother. But these people were pulling the hats right over her head.

"*That* one," decided Miss Cliffe suddenly. "No, don't try on any more. That's the hat for that costume."

Rather a funny shape but quite a plain felt. Four and eleven, thought Euphemia hopefully.

"That's quite the smartest, madam," agreed the girl, "it's only just arrived from Paris and it's most reasonable. Only three guineas."

Three guineas . . . a plain brown felt . . . three guineas. . . . Euphemia was on the point of uttering a wild protest, when she remembered that it was a dream, and, of course, it didn't matter how much money you spent on a hat in

a dream. She would wake up tomorrow and find her black coat and skirt and hat hanging behind the door and her money in the shabby black leather purse underneath her pillow.

They were taking off her thick woollen stockings now. The man with the tape measure had disappeared again. Euphemia's feet, though large, were shapely and unspoilt by corns or callouses. Brown silk stockings. Euphemia's feet had never experienced silk stockings before. They savoured them exultantly. . . Cool and yet not cold . . . distinctly pleasant.

The shoes were of dark brown leather with low heels. They laced up neatly and made Euphemia's feet look strangely elegant despite their size.

"No, nothing of that sort," Miss Cliffe had said, waving aside a pair of high-heeled patent leather shoes with buckles.

Just as Miss Cliffe was gazing with frowning, impersonal approval at Euphemia's feet, another girl arrived with an armful of brown gloves.

"How much is this pair?" said Miss Cliffe. "This is the best match."

The dream was growing more and more ridiculous.

Sixteen and eleven for a pair of gloves. . . She'd have a good laugh over all this when she woke up, thought Euphemia.

"Will you send all the old things to this address?" Miss Cliffe was saying. "Yes, cash. And will you let us have the bill now? We'll wait here."

As soon as they were alone in the room, Miss Cliffe moved a chair to face the window and said to Euphemia, "Will you sit here for a moment or two, please, Miss Tracy?"

Euphemia moved obediently to the chair, and Miss Cliffe took a little case out of her bag. Then she set to work carefully, still with that detached, appraising frown, upon Euphemia's face. She rubbed a tiny red pad upon her cheeks. She drew a red stick across her lips. She took out a black pencil and applied it to eyebrows and

lashes. Finally, she took out a powder puff and powdered Euphemia's face. It tickled unbearably, but Euphemia was past protest or even question.

A girl came in with a bill. Miss Cliffe took Euphemia's shabby black leather purse and emptied it, adding a pound note from her own.

"I'm afraid I've just gone beyond what there is in your purse," she said to Euphemia, "but it doesn't matter."

Euphemia stood there in the brown costume, the silk stockings, the neat, expensive shoes, and realised that she was penniless. For a moment she felt a sudden panic that was immediately followed by relief. It didn't matter being penniless in a dream. . .

Miss Cliffe was putting the receipt into her bag.

"Now let's go and have something to eat," she said.

Euphemia followed her through amazing Aladdin's caves of colour and glitter, of luxurious silks and satins and furs and jewels and flowers. She tried to impress the details on her mind, because, if she did find courage to tell the dream to Miss Cliffe tomorrow, she wanted to remember as much of it as possible. Tier upon tier of glittering necklaces . . . a forest of fur coats . . . dressing-gowns of satin and swans-down . . . magnificent shimmering evening-gowns. . . Perhaps if she couldn't find courage to tell the dream to Miss Cliffe, she would tell it to Mrs. Lewes, who had been so kind to her yesterday, or even to that nice girl who had been telling her about her work. She wouldn't tell Mrs. Lancaster, in case Mrs. Lancaster again tried to persuade her to go to the beautiful house with the twenty or so other women.

Facing the possibility that it might not be a dream after all, but that she might really be penniless, Euphemia decided that she would rather go to the workhouse than to the beautiful house with the large sunny dining-room and the garden that was almost a show place.

She was sitting opposite Miss Cliffe at a little table in a huge mirror-panelled room full of other little tables, and a waiter had put a plate of roast beef in front of her. The two ate in silence. There were bright red spots in Miss Cliffe's cheeks, though she had not rouged. If it doesn't

come off, she was thinking, I'll have done the stupidest thing I've ever done in my life. Perhaps I was a fool even to try it. . . . Then she remembered the sweet, disdainful smile of Mrs. Lancaster's that was like the flick of a whip, and thought: No, whatever happens, I won't be sorry I tried it. Even if I'm left with the woman on my hands without a halfpenny and have to keep her. . . . It's funny how you can put up with a thing for years, and then quite suddenly you can't put up with it any longer and you've got to do something. It came over me last night quite suddenly when she said, "Will you go and see if the car's there, Miss Cliffe?" Perhaps it was with her cousin having been so nice to me just before that made it seem worse than usual.

Euphemia had found that she was hungry and was making a good meal. She was much disconcerted, however, by a smart woman sitting next to her, who, whenever Euphemia turned to look at her, seemed to be turning to look at Euphemia, and so Euphemia had hastily to turn away again. Suddenly a dreadful suspicion came to Euphemia. She put out a finger towards the woman (who at the same time put out a finger towards her) and it touched the hard surface of a mirror. The smart woman with the pink cheeks, red lips, plain brown coat and skirt, was herself. Again she conquered the flood of panic that threatened to overwhelm her by reflecting that nothing mattered in a dream. . . .

She followed Miss Cliffe down to the street.

"Now, this is the address," said Miss Cliffe, handing her a paper. "Go there in a taxi, and say that you've heard of the post through Dr. Marriott and have come to apply for it. You can give my name as reference."

Only one part of this seemed to penetrate Euphemia's mind.

"Can't I go in a 'bus?" she said.

"Of course," said Miss Cliffe, impatiently, "but you should always go to an important interview in a taxi. It puts you in a better position with yourself."

She summoned a taxi and bundled the still protesting Euphemia into it unceremoniously.

Then she stood alone on the street kerb and raised her hand to her head. She felt shaken and exhausted.

"You can give my name as a reference." Yes, and then she'd have to admit that she'd only known the woman two days. This little spurt of defiance against Mrs. Lancaster was likely to cost her rather dear.

She was a fool, of course. . . Still, there was a sporting chance that the thing might come off. . . She realised that her head was aching intolerably, and decided to go home at once and take a stiff dose of aspirin.

XII

THE taxi gave Euphemia a sense of exhilaration, so that she felt suddenly, mysteriously equal to any demands that life might make on her, even in a dream. That feeling, however, died away as soon as she was left at the graceful pedimented doorway of the Georgian house in Hampstead. She raised and dropped the antique brass knocker in a sort of desperation, then threw a quick glance around. Was there time to disappear before anyone came? Could she have got out of sight before——? But a housemaid had opened the door and was looking at her enquiringly.

For a moment Euphemia was at a loss what to say, then suddenly she remembered the formula that her mother had taught her when they were playing the game of "Lady Angela Trevor's At Home Day."

"Is Mr. Host at home?" she said in her best Haydon Court manner. She hardly expected to be taken seriously, and it surprised her slightly when the housemaid opened the door and stepped back respectfully. She entered a broad passage hall. At the further end a glass door gave her a glimpse of a lawn surrounded by trees. In the hall was an oak chest, a lacquered grandfather clock, and a semi-circular table covered with letters and papers. The floor was of polished oak, with a Persian rug in the middle. Euphemia was gazing about her, lost in admiration, when she saw that the maid was holding another door open for her.

"Will you come in here a minute, please? What name shall I give?"

"Miss Tracy," said Euphemia, entering.

It was a pleasant little room. The chairs were covered

with chintz, and chintz curtains hung at the long, narrow windows overlooking the shady lawn. There was a mirror on the wall, and in this Euphemia was surprised to see the smart woman who had embarrassed her by sitting so near her in the restaurant. But the surprise now only lasted for a second. Euphemia was growing accustomed to the reflection. It was herself. Incredibly, amazingly, ridiculously, it was herself. She felt again as she had felt when, as a little girl, she had swathed herself in an old lace curtain and had pretended to be Lady Angela Trevor at a Ball. She amused herself now by moving her head backwards and forwards, bowing it with graciousness, drawing it up with dignity. Her eyes had grown bright, almost mischievous, her full lips had twisted into a smile. And again that feeling that she had had in the taxi swept over her—a gay defiance of life, a dare-devil swagger. It was all a glorious adventure—this pretending that she was the smart woman in the mirror, this pretending that she was capable of looking after a large house. It was the game she had played with her mother in her little girlhood suddenly become real. But still, it was a game. She almost expected the door to open and her mother to come in with outstretched arms, saying, "How do you do, Lady Angela?"

The door opened, but it was the trim housemaid, not Euphemia's mother, who entered.

"Will you step this way, madam?"

Across the hall again to a room on the opposite side. It was a large, high room, completely lined with bookcases. On the mantelpiece stood the model of a ship. The floor was covered by a carpet so thick that, when she trod on it, Euphemia felt as if her feet had suddenly and miraculously ceased to exist. A man who was sitting at a carved oak writing-desk by a French window turned to her with a pleasant smile as she entered. He was middle-aged, with hair just turning grey at the temples. His eyes were blue, his nose aquiline, his moustache and short imperial beautifully trimmed. His grey suit was of fine cloth, perfectly tailored. His narrow hands were white and manicured.

When he stood up, she saw that he was tall and slender. He stooped, but his very stoop had grace and elegance. She took in these impressions in a confused, blurred fashion. All her newly found assurance had deserted her. It wasn't a light-spirited exploit, a gay adventure, any longer. It wasn't even a dream. It was simply an outrageous piece of impudence. That she should have dared to come to a house like this. . . She prayed desperately that the ground might open and swallow her up. It was as if she had suddenly awakened to find herself really involved in the preposterous situation that she had been dreaming of. Panic swept over her. She had been mad. She even found it in her heart at that moment to regret that she had not married George. This, at any rate, could not have happened if she had married George.

Mr. Host was shaking hands with her, and saying, "Miss Tracy, isn't it?" in a voice so pleasant that it asked her her business almost diffidently; was moving forward a chair with his beautiful white hands, and saying, "Won't you sit down?"

She sat down. Confused explanations and apologies rose to her lips ("I'm sorry . . . I'll go now . . . I ought never to have come. . . I didn't know. . . I'm not—I wouldn't do at all. I looked after my father, but it was only a cottage. . . I've never been in a house like this before. . . I've been mad . . . it's all Miss Cliffe's fault. . . I'll go now"). But she never uttered them. There was a mirror on the wall (antique, beautiful, like everything else in the room), and, happening to glance into it, Euphemia met the gaze of the smart woman who had accompanied her. There seemed to be a flicker of contempt in the brown eyes, as if the smart woman were saying, "You poor creature! Are you giving in already?"

That flicker of contempt stung Euphemia. She drew herself up, and said with slow dignity:

"I've come to apply for the position of housekeeper. I heard of it through Dr. Marriott."

The man's face lit up with interest. "Marriott? Oh, yes. . . Is he a friend of yours?"

"No, but it was a friend of his who told me about it."

"Oh, yes." A friendly, almost conciliatory smile hovered about the brown imperial. Mr. Host leant back in his swivel chair and joined the tips of his beautifully manicured fingers. There was a gold signet ring on the little finger of his left hand. The polished nails gleamed in the sunshine.

"You know, of course, that I'm an author?"

"Yes."

There was a perceptible pause. A slight depression seemed to creep over the author. He sighed and, still with his faint smile, swept his hand towards the bookcases.

"There are the results of my misspent hours," he said.

"Three shelves full. Dreadful, I know. My attitude to it is one of abject apology. If Parliament were to pass an Act that every author who writes more than fifteen novels should be publicly executed, I should be the first to admit its justice. Are you a reader, Miss Tracy?"

"Don't make a fool of yourself," she was saying to herself. "Just answer his questions. Then he'll tell you you won't do, and you can go. Anyway, don't make a fool of yourself. Don't go blurting out all the things you were just going to blurt out a minute ago. Don't let him see that you're frightened, either. And don't give yourself away. Let him just tell Dr. Marriott that you weren't suitable. Don't do or say anything that'll make him laugh at you."

She felt as she had felt with her father when he was in his worst mood. She drew her armour about her, becoming impassive, detached, answering shortly and only when it was necessary.

"I've read very little."

"What have you read?"

"Only Shakespeare and Chaucer and Malory and the Bible."

"Excellent," he said with a rueful smile. "So you don't approve of modern novels?"

"I've never read them."

The ruefulness deepened.

"You're hard on us, Miss Tracy. . . But I mustn't take

up your time chattering like this. As to this housekeeper place, my wife died when my daughter was born, and since then my sister kept house for me. . . She married last month, and my daughter is to be married early next year, so that is why I'm engaging a housekeeper. 'This is my daughter.' He pointed to a miniature that stood on his desk. A thin, keen, childish face—strangely attractive despite its hint of weakness—tawny eyes, a mop of chestnut curls.

"She's marrying Denis Callander," went on the author, with deprecating pride. "He's a mere boy, but he published a book of poems last year, you know, that created quite a furore. My son married last month. That is my son's wedding group."

He pointed to a photograph in a silver frame on his desk. A handsome youth with curly hair like his sister's, and a sulky but disarmingly boyish mouth. His bride looked young, arrogant, self-possessed, faintly defiant.

Euphemia's eyes went from the miniature to the photograph in the silver frame, from the photograph in the silver frame back to the miniature, seeing them through a haze of glamour. Here was Romance. Here was Love, Youth, Beauty. . .

Then her eyes went back to her interviewer, seeing him, too, through the haze of glamour. Here was Fame, Intellect, Wealth, Distinction. . . She worshipped them in silence. And again panic swept over her. That she should have *dared* to step into such a world, even as applicant for the post of housekeeper. . .

"Whom would your reference actually come from?" Mr. Host was saying.

"From Miss Cliffe," said Euphemia. "She keeps the Belgravia Ladies' Residential Club, where Mrs. Lancaster lives." (Next he'll ask how long you've known Miss Cliffe, and then he'll put you on the doorstep—and serve you right.)

"I've met Mrs. Lancaster. A charming woman. She's Dr. Marriott's cousin, isn't she?"

"Yes."

(*And without a penny. . . Dollying yourself up like this. Mad, that's what she was. And you madder still to let her do it.*)

But it did not seem to occur to Mr. Host to ask her how long she had known Miss Cliffe.

"So you don't read modern novels?" he was saying.

"No."

He was a creature from the world of dreams with his cleverness and elegance and beautiful suit. His housekeeper should be a housekeeper from the world of dreams—a graceful, willowy *châtelaine*, with white hair, a rustling black dress, a touch of white lace at her throat and wrists.

"I'm afraid that it's not an easy post," he continued, with his charming, deprecating smile. "You see, we authors are queer kittle cattle. Our reputation is dependent upon the whims of individuals called critics, who disagree as much as the proverbial doctors. For instance,"—he opened a drawer and took out a little sheaf of press cuttings—"this gentleman says that I am in the foremost rank of English novelists, and that my technique is so perfect that nothing I write can lack distinction; while this gentleman seems less sure. He talks about facility and slickness."

Quite suddenly he ceased to be Fame, Romance, a creature from the world of dreams. He was a little boy, a rather conceited little boy, whose feelings had been hurt.

The panic left her. She smiled—a large, motherly smile that altered her whole face.

"They're not worth taking any notice of," she said. "I expect they feel they've got to say things like that sometimes, or people wouldn't think they were real critics."

He looked at her in silence. A stream of badly dressed, rather furtive women had come to apply for this post. He had grown tired of interviewing them. Vain as he was, he found them equally irritating whether they poured out fulsome praise of his books or apologised abjectly for not having read them ("I know your *name*, of course. . . I've *often* tried to get hold of one to read"). This woman had been different, though from the very first he had made up his mind that she would not do. He was over-sensitive and

egotistical, and not a day passed on which he did not suffer acutely from some real or imagined slight. The thought of the press cutting containing the ominous words "facility" and "slickness" that had arrived that morning had rankled all day. He had not meant to mention it to her, but it had suddenly pressed its sting into his memory and he had spoken on an impulse. And immediately he had felt enveloped in a large, warm motherliness, consoled and comforted. It was nothing she had said. She had, in fact, merely uttered a futile platitude. It was her voice and smile. She was still smiling at him—the smile that made him a little boy again, gathered to some large, soft, maternal breast. And he knew that this woman, whom he had found so strange and curt and forbidding and generally impossible, must come to live in his house. It was absolutely necessary to him that, when his spirit was frayed and chafed by the unkindness of his fellow-men, he should have this warm, healing glow to turn to.

"Well, then, you'll come, will you?"

He had said the words before he realised that he was going to say them. With a tardy impulse of caution, he added hastily, "on a month's trial, of course."

Euphemia was still engrossed by the amazing discovery that here was not a creature of Romance and Glamour, but a child, a vain, spoilt, peevish, lovable child.

"Of course, everyone's just a child once you get to know them," she was saying to herself. The discovery thrilled her. She saw Mrs. Lancaster as a little girl pirouetting before a mirror. . . Mrs. Lewes as another little girl, playing with dolls, making little frocks for them edged with Valenciennes lace. . . Then she realised that Mr. Host was looking at her with a smile that was expectant, nervous, pleading, a smile that was equally exasperated with himself for making the offer and with her for hesitating. She smiled back at him reassuringly. "Yes, I'll come," she said.

There was a slight pause.

"Your address is —?"

"The Belgravia Ladies' Residential Club."

"And you'll be able to begin next week?"

"Yes."

He was looking at her wistfully, sulkily. The sudden radiance of understanding and consolation had gone. This was the strange, brusque, forbidding woman whom he had decided not to engage. She had played a trick on him. It wasn't fair. . .

He came to the door and shook hands with her, smiling his charming, faintly peevish smile.

"He wouldn't look so nice without his beard," she said to herself, as she walked down the path to the gate.

Miss Cliffe herself opened the door. She had passed a wretched afternoon, steeling herself to endure the sneers and reproaches of Mrs. Lancaster and to support a penniless Euphemia for the rest of her life.

"Well?" she said.

"I've got the post," said Euphemia, "on a month's trial."

"I knew you would, of course," said Miss Cliffe quietly. (In imagination she was leaping into the air, throwing up her hat and shouting. . .)

Just at that moment Mrs. Lancaster came into the hall and went towards the stairs, glancing at Euphemia as she passed. It was quite evident that she did not recognise her. It was also evident that she approved of her. The smile she bestowed upon Miss Cliffe was one of condescending approval.

"Miss Tracy's just been to see Mr. Host," said Miss Cliffe pleasantly.

Mrs. Lancaster stared at Euphemia. Her mouth dropped open with amazement, her eyes widened as recognition dawned in them.

"I told her that Mr. Host wanted a housekeeper," went on Miss Cliffe suavely, "and she's just been to see him. He's engaged her and she's going next week."

A dull purple tint crept into Mrs. Lancaster's face. Every vestige of its calm self-assurance had left it.

She opened and closed her mouth several times as if trying to speak, then with an inarticulate murmur turned

and went quickly up the stairs. Miss Cliffe gazed after her, her lips set in a calm, triumphant smile. In that moment every petty slight that Mrs. Lancaster had ever inflicted on her, or ever would inflict on her, was avenged.

Euphemia went to bed early. She felt tired, but something of Miss Cliffe's calm triumph had communicated itself to her. She was Mr. Host's housekeeper. She was definitely engaged. Tomorrow Miss Cliffe was going to take her on a second shopping expedition to buy the other things she would want ("You can pay me back from your salary," Miss Cliffe had said).

In her bedroom she undressed, watered the geranium, and took down her Bible. She would have liked to read the story of Jezebel (the "Throw her down" part always thrilled her), but she felt that as a sort of thank-offering for her miraculous good fortune she ought to read the New Testament. She began to read the Epistle to the Corinthians. As she read, she could see St. Paul, fiery, generous, impulsive, hot-tempered -- white beard, weather-beaten face, blue eyes that could blaze with anger -- letting his exasperation flame out over his troublesome converts: "Have you not houses to eat and to drink in?" then suddenly pulling himself up. . .

"*He* knew," she said aloud, "*he* knew that people are just children."

XIII

THE next Sunday Euphemia went to Hampstead to take up her duties in Mr. Host's household. She was shown into the library, where Mr. Host came forward to greet her with outstretched hands.

"Splendid," he said. "Splendid, splendid! Now, Miss Tracy, I'm not going to allow you to do anything at all till tomorrow; you are to be my guest this afternoon and evening."

He drew a chair forward with an elaborate air of courtesy and rang for tea. Then he leant back in the carved chair at his desk, his elbows resting on the arms, his finger-tips touching.

"I wanted you to come here on Sunday, Miss Tracy," he continued, "because I wanted you to see in full swing the sort of life you may expect here. Sunday is our most representative day, as it were. We are at our worst on Sunday, and I wanted you to see us at our worst, so that if you feel you really can't endure it—but I hope you won't feel that. Anyway, it's always good policy, I think, don't you, to show people the darkest side to begin with, and then they can't later accuse you of having misled them."

Euphemia did not know what to say to this, but she soon discovered that she was not expected to say anything. Her employer continued with a wave of his white, beautifully shaped hand:

"I'm expecting my son and daughter-in-law, and, of course, my little girl will be here. I'm going to lose her so soon now that every minute of her is precious to me. I'm a foolish old fellow, you know, Miss Tracy. . ."

The trim housemaid brought tea, and Mr. Host poured out a cup for Euphemia and placed it on a little table by her side as if it were a votive offering, then hovered about her solicitously with plates of scones and sandwiches.

Euphemia would have felt intensely uncomfortable had she not had a peculiar sensation of being a stage property, of being in fact no more real to him than the plates he handed to her.

He poured out a cup of tea for himself, put it on his desk beside him, then continued:

"Now I'll prepare you for the very worst, Miss Tracy, and the very worst is that this evening my monthly At Home takes place. Quite an informal affair, really. Just a few friends—literary and otherwise. We try not to be too shoppy but," the charming smile flickered again above the brown imperial—"I'm afraid it tends generally to be more literary than otherwise."

There was a few moments' silence while he took a drink of tea and put a tiny dice-like sandwich delicately into his mouth. Euphemia wondered again whether she ought to say anything to fill the pause. While she was wondering, he pushed his tea-cup away from him with a movement that produced almost the effect of an act of ritual, then went across to a deep leather sofa where he deposited his tall frame with careless elegance.

"I think you'll find us very easy to manage, Miss Tracy. I'm meekness itself in spite of the spoiling I get from my little girl. . . Her fiancé's inclined to be a tiny bit jealous of the old man, you know. . . I've always made friends of my children. Marriage hasn't spoilt my friendship with my boy, and I don't think it will spoil my friendship with my little girl."

Euphemia had never been to the theatre, but she felt a compelling desire to clap. Silence and verbal comment seemed equally inadequate.

"And now tell me something about yourself, Miss Tracy," he went on. "Miss Cliffe, of course, has told me how capable and how brave you are. Your father died recently, didn't he?"

"Yes," said Euphemia, conscientiously responding to his demand for her family history. "He was an invalid. He'd been a valet and had had an accident. My mother was a housemaid. I lived in the country till last week."

But Mr. Host's attention had wandered. The situation had exhausted itself. The scene was at an end. He took out his watch and glanced with an apologetic smile towards his desk, on which lay a confused pile of manuscript.

Euphemia rose, but immediately the front door was opened and shut with a bang, and there came the sound of voices from the hall.

"My little girl," said the author. "No, don't go, Miss Tracy. You must meet her."

The girl of the miniature entered, drawing a close-fitting hat from the mop of chestnut curls and flinging it carelessly on to a chair by the door. Euphemia looked with interest at the thin, keen, nervous face, with the tawny eyes, golden lashes, and the faint powdering of freckles over the creamy skin. A smart black dress with bolero jacket and white collar and cuffs accentuated the thinness of the undeveloped frame.

"This is Miss Tracy, my dear," said Mr. Host. "She's kindly come to look after us and supervise the making of our bread and butter."

The glance the girl gave Euphemia was slightly hostile.

"How-do-you-do," she said curtly, throwing herself with an air of weariness and boredom on to the sofa by her father's side. His arm closed round her, and she lay with her eyes shut, relaxed but unresponsive in his embrace.

"You mustn't go, Miss Tracy," he said again. "Pour out some tea for my little girl."

"I don't want any," said the girl. "Denis may, though. He's just washing his hands."

At that minute a picturesque young man entered. He had dark eyes, encircled with faint lines of dissipation, and a beautiful mouth and chin. He wore a low flowing neck-tie vaguely suggestive of Byron.

"This is Miss Tracy, Denis," said Mr. Host. "She's come to take over the housekeeping duties here, so that,

when you steal my little girl, I shan't starve for food, however lonely I am in spirit."

His arm tightened affectionately round the figure of his daughter, who still lay with closed eyes in its shelter.

The boy greeted Euphemia, took his cup of tea, and sat down on a low pouffe facing the sofa.

Mr. Host looked at Euphemia with the pleasant smile that bridged so charmingly the gulf between their stations and included her as an equal in the family circle.

"Denis is one of our most promising young poets, you know, Miss Tracy. My little girl's going to be foolish enough to marry from one literary family into another. She's doing it with her eyes open. She knows what touchy kittle cattle authors are."

The girl gave no sign of having heard this. The young poet, who had taken a piece of cake from the stand, said, "Damn! Seed! Why the devil does every piece of cake I ever get hold of turn out to be seed?" He began absorbedly to pick out seeds from the cake. "It's impossible to get rid of the beastly things. You'd think you could pick them out and leave just cake, but you can't."

Euphemia passed him the cake-stand, and he took a piece of plum cake, examining it critically and extracting some smaller currants with an air of deep suspicion. "I can't think what people put the things in for," he said. "It's the foulest flavour in the world, and they look like dead maggots. Nobody but a degenerate would ever want to eat the stuff."

The author's glance swept round the room from the writing-table to the bookshelves that held his novels, from the bookshelves that held his novels to the poet absorbed in his currant cake, from the poet to the slight childish form that leant against his arm. Euphemia was included in his sweeping glance. There was a complacent smile on his lips, but in his eyes a look of wistfulness and doubt. It was as if his lips said, "Here I am, a famous author, surrounded by the love of my children, the admiration of my dependents. Here is a literary disciple of mine, a humble admirer despite his own genius, who is

going to marry my little girl who worships me." . . And as if his eyes said, "But is it like that, after all? Am I famous? Does this gifted young poet admire me? Is he really a gifted young poet? Does my little girl adore me? Is it all as it seems to me, as I want it to be. . .?"

"When I was a child," the poet was saying in his slightly drawling voice, "I knew another child who had a perverted taste for slugs. He used to eat them by the dozen. No one could stop him. He's one of the most brilliant men on the Stock Exchange today."

Imogen spoke without opening her eyes.

"Denis, if you knew how sick I am of the sound of your voice you'd shut up and go home."

"Oh no, I wouldn't," he said coolly. "Nothing on earth would make me go home till I'd finished my tea. I like these sandwiches. They're made of kipper. Kipper is my favourite food. If I had to be a fish I'd choose to be a kipper. They are sophisticated without being exclusive. Don't you agree with me, Imogen? I suppose you don't. You never do."

"I'm sorry to seem unresponsive," said the girl, "but your particular brand of airy persiflage grows rather wearisome after an hour or so. Remember I've had you since eleven. It's difficult to keep up a show of appreciation."

"You never overstrain yourself doing that, do you? Today, I may remark, less even than usual."

Both spoke in drawling, casual voices, but Euphemia had a sudden consciousness of secret, nerve-racked antagonism.

"What exactly do you mean by that?" said Imogen, sitting up and opening her tawny eyes with irritating innocence.

"I mean that when you come to a party in my room you might take the trouble to make yourself pleasant to my friends."

"You shouldn't have quarrelled with me on the way there. I was quite prepared to try to make the wretched thing go."

He gave a short laugh.

"I quarrel with you! I like that. But in any case that's

no reason why you should be deliberately rude to my friends, is it?"

"I've often told you I hate your friends. There's only one decent man among them."

He looked at her with narrowed eyes.

"And who's that?" he said.

Beneath the joints in his armour of elaborate nonchalance there showed a faint glimpse of hysteria. He swaggered, but the swagger was not quite convincing.

"That man from South Africa."

"Oh yes," he said. "Peter Cornish—our friend, the turnip. I knew him in my schooldays. I can't imagine why he's attached himself to me now. . . . Yes, I noticed that you seemed to be getting on with him very nicely."

Her slight form stiffened.

"I suppose you expect me to sit twiddling my thumbs till you've finished flirting with Corinne Meadows."

He made no reply, only stretched out a hand for another sandwich with a smile that was deliberately insulting.

"You needn't think I'm jealous," she said in a tense, unsteady voice.

Euphemia glanced at the author. He wasn't there at all. He sat, his lips curved into their faint charming smile, gazing absently into the distance.

Imogen turned to Euphemia with a short laugh.

"You mustn't mind us, Miss Tracy. Denis and I can only agree when we're slightly tight. When we're either sober or really drunk we quarrel all the time."

The poet rose and carefully brushed the crumbs from his trousers.

"I'll be off now," he said. "I'm not sure that I'll be able to get round this evening."

"Don't try," said Imogen. "Take Corinne to the pictures instead. I'm sure she loves the pictures. Take her to see Doug. and Mary. To judge from her conversation, they're just about up to her level."

He shook hands with Mr. Host and with Euphemia, nodded coolly to Imogen, and went out of the room.

"The trouble with Denis," said Imogen, as the door

closed after him, "is that just because he's got a Byronic mouth he imagines himself the complete Don Juan, and it doesn't suit him a bit."

Euphemia looked at her. Her pose of indifference barely concealed something fine strained to the breaking point, rasped nerves and the tiredness of a child who will not admit that it is tired. Her thin form, leaning against her father's arm, was tense and rigid.

"I must go and change," she said without moving.

Euphemia's shyness had vanished suddenly.

"Why don't you go and rest a little?" she suggested.

The tawny eyes opened wide.

"Rest? What on earth for?"

"It would do you good."

As if taken off her guard, the child smiled suddenly, an ingenuous, friendly little smile that was somehow heart-rending.

"I'm sure it wouldn't," she said.

Mr. Host had turned to Euphemia with an air of solicitude.

"These children didn't weary you, chaffing each other, I hope?" he said.

Imogen had assumed her mantle of sophistication again.

"If Denis and I ever come to a hand-to-hand fight," she drawled, "— and we're near enough to it sometimes— Daddy will just say we've been having a little romp."

She rose as a tall, handsome young man entered the room. He was obviously her brother. He had the same curly chestnut hair, but his eyes were blue.

"Hello, Brian, old thing," she said as she passed him, "I'm just going to change."

His father rose and held out both hands.

"Delighted to see you, old boy," he said. "Delighted. Had your tea? Miss Tracy will give you some. This is Miss Tracy." The charming smile was turned in Euphemia's direction for a second. . . . "My new housekeeper and confidante. . . . Sit down here and tell us all your news."

The boy sat on an arm-chair near the sofa. The father

resumed his seat and leant forward, his elbows upon his knees.

"Splendid to see you, old chap," he said again heartily. "I've missed you a lot since your young woman stole you from me. But there's no need to tell you that, is there? And, after all, one of my pet theories is that a new relationship need never spoil an old one—if the old one is real. And I think our friendship was real enough, wasn't it? We've been pals ever since you were a little chap that high."

He designated with his white shapely hand the height of an average puppy from the floor.

Euphemia, who had relit the spirit-kettle and was making fresh tea in the second teapot, was conscious once again of a curious sense of inadequacy. Here was a picture, carefully posed. Father and Son. Thunderous applause should have greeted it. Son was playing his part less well than Father. In fact he was not playing it at all. He sat staring in front of him, his lips sullen, his blue eyes clouded.

"Elaine quite well?" said the father.

"Yes, thanks."

"You've just missed Denis. He was here three minutes ago."

The boy roused himself.

"Is Imogen really going to marry that futile ass?"

The father laughed as if the question had been a joke.

"He's a coming man. That book of poems he published last spring made quite a stir."

"Only because no one could make head or tail of it, and they thought they'd be on the safe side by saying it was a work of genius. They've probably realised by now what fools they were, and they'll let him have it over his next. . . Thanks." He took his tea-cup from Euphemia.

"Morrison praised it, you know," protested Mr. Host. "He's careful what he praises. He has a way of magnificently ignoring most of us."

"It was piffle all the same," said the boy. "Oh, I say, don't wait on me," as Euphemia handed him the cake-

stand. He took a small scone and ate it in one mouthful. "Utter piffle!" he added.

There was a doubtful, hesitating smile on the author's pleasant mouth. So might a man look who suspects suddenly that he has not, after all, backed a winner.

"He seems to me to bear the hall-mark of genius," he said, "and he has pretty sound literary views."

His son grinned suddenly. "You mean he agrees with everything you say because he's in love with Imogen," he said, stretching out for a piece of currant cake. "Thanks awfully, Miss Tracy. . . Yes, it was just right. Five cups is my average."

The author's smile had grown constrained. "I think it was hardly that. . . He wrote a very favourable review of my work in the *Onlooker* when he'd barely met Imogen."

"Ah, but he *had* met her. . . He goes about with a rotten crowd, too."

"I think that's exaggeration," said the author mildly. "Eugene Marlow's his great friend, and Eugene Marlow's the foremost sculptor of the age."

"He may be, but he's a rotter all the same. . . Still, that's Imogen's funeral, not mine. I've got enough troubles of my own without taking on hers."

"Is Elaine coming this evening?" said his father.

The boy's gloom deepened.

"Oh yes. She's coming later with old mother Darlington. I've not seen her today. She was at a bun fight of some sort at her mother's yesterday, so she stayed the night and is coming on here with her."

There was a short silence, then, stretching out for another piece of cake and gesticulating with it and eating it in turn as he talked, he burst out:

"I can't think what the devil she married me for. I hardly ever see her. I shouldn't mind if she went about with friends. That would be normal, at any rate. But hanging about with her mother all day and every day! She's out of the flat the minute after I go to work, and she doesn't get back till the minute before I do. Goes shopping with her mother, has lunch with her mother, goes to a

matinée or a bridge party with her mother. It's unnatural. She says it doesn't matter to me where she is while I'm at work, but it does. Nice thing to have got a home and furnished it just for three or four hours out of the day. It *isn't* a home. It's got a beastly un-lived-in feeling. I come home and find her tired out with trailing round with the old hag all day, and then she gets annoyed because I don't want to go to bed at nine."

He took another piece of cake, still absorbed in his grievances, still talking with his mouth full and gesticulating with his cake as he talked. "And there's a scene if I even *start* to tell her what I think of her mother. Got the nerve to say her mother comes first. What I say is, why the devil did she marry me, if she's only going to play at it like this? Calls the old woman's place 'home.' I tell you she's got me raw. And it grows worse and worse. Ten to one nowadays I come home to find a note telling me she's staying to dinner with her mother and will I come too. Well, I jolly well *won't*. I'm not going near the old hag. So she stays the night with her to pay me out. I'm beginning to loathe the beastly flat. It's just like part of a furniture shop. Nobody in it all day, and just a lot of smirking wedding presents stuck round. She keeps nearly all her things at her mother's still. She can't mend anything, because her workbox is at her mother's ('at home,' she calls it). *And* her books. *And* her tennis racquet. *And* everything else. 'What's the use of bringing them here?' she says. 'I'm at home all day.'" He drained his cup with an outraged gesture and handed it to Euphemia. "We've been married a month and, my God, I've had about enough of it. Expects me to trail about with the two of them like a Pom. I'm beginning to be surprised now that she didn't bring her mother on the honeymoon."

He stopped for lack of breath. Euphemia looked at the author. Again he was not there. He had withdrawn from this inharmonious world to a world of his own, a world of harmony and romance. Things like this did not happen in his world, the world he had created, the world he liked to think was the real world. People went through troubles,

of course (in which they were gay, confident, and intrepid), they met with adversity in plenty, but the young hero and heroine did not appear tired of each other after one month of married life. The silence lasted so long, however, that he had to come out of his world and say something. He leant forward and laid his hand on his son's shoulder.

"Don't worry, old chap," he said. "Everything will come out right. After all, we've been through worse than this together, haven't we?"

The pained look had faded from his face. Father and Son, pals since Son was a little chap so high, standing shoulder to shoulder against the world.

The boy did not respond or repulse him. He sat, as if lost to his surroundings, glowering angrily in front of him.

Then absently he stretched out his hand for yet another piece of cake and began to eat it with gusto. His school-boy appetite, together with his angry bewilderment, wrung Euphemia's heart.

"Just play with a straight bat, my boy," went on the father in his pleasant voice, "and keep your eye on the ball. It's how you play the game that matters, not whether you win or lose."

Euphemia was watching him with interest. He lived in the world that she had watched from her cottage window. It had been a real enough world to her then, but, now that she had come down from her cottage window, it was already beginning to break up and to reassemble itself, forming quite a different pattern, a pattern more thrilling, more endearing than when glamour and romance had informed it.

"And remember," he went on, "what we're doing may seem useless now, but often the piece that seems useless is the pivot of the whole. It's only when the puzzle is fitted together that we can see the picture."

The situation was well in hand, but it might get out of hand any moment. He rose hastily and with a courteous "See you both later," retreated in good order.

The boy rose too, lit a cigarette, then took another piece of cake from the cake-stand.

"He's a hopeless old ass, of course," he said to Euphemia, who was putting the cups together on the tray. "I suppose you've found that out. But he means well, and somehow one can't help being fond of him."

Then, eating and smoking at the same time, he went out by the French window into the garden.

XIV

THE At Home was in full swing. The guests wore costumes that varied from correct dress clothes to sweaters and grey flannel trousers, from satin *décolletés* to linen smocks. There was something rather self-conscious about the assembly. An undercurrent of doubt ran through its most positive tones. One felt that, if the whole gathering could have taken a single form, that single form would have been the uncertain smile that hovered above its host's well-trimmed imperial. It wanted so terribly to be the Real Thing, and it was not sure—not *quite* sure—that it was. There were too many people of whom one had never heard. There were too many people who, confident enough themselves, were referred to with faint sneers by Critics who Counted.

Then Elissa Durrant was announced, and the doubt vanished. Even Euphemia, sitting in a retired corner watching the people around her with a sort of intoxicated interest, was aware that Elissa Durrant redeemed the situation. The whole room seemed to draw a sigh of relief when she appeared, as if it said to itself, "It's all right. We are the Real Thing. She wouldn't be here if we weren't the Real Thing."

She was a tall, thin, graceful woman with a narrow face that was just too long, and deep-set, piercing eyes. Her blue-black hair was sleeked closely to her head, and she wore a Chinese shawl pulled tightly across her hollow chest. She was talking to Mr. Host in an assertive, penetrating voice. He broke in occasionally, but, before he had said more than half a dozen words, she had resumed her

monologue, ignoring his proffered contribution. Flattered and gratified as his smile was, there was still a faint ruefulness about it. He had such a lot of interesting things to say, things really worthy of Elissa Durrant, things that he was sure would impress her if only she would listen, but she wouldn't listen.

His son was sitting on the leather sofa, leaning back, his hands in his pockets, his legs outstretched in front of him, staring into vacancy, a scowl on his boyish face. At the other end of the sofa sat Denis Callander. He talked airily and fluently to everyone who came near him, but at intervals he looked at his watch and threw impatient glances towards the door. The hard electric light exaggerated the lines about his eyes that spoil his beauty. Suddenly he made his way over to Euphemia.

"Do you know where Miss Host is?" he said abruptly.

Euphemia felt as taken aback as if an actor had suddenly stepped down from the stage to address her.

"No," she said, "I've not seen her."

He jerked his head over to where Elissa Durrant stood talking to her host.

"The lion and the lamb," he said. "Charming sight, isn't it?"

It was obvious that he was slightly nettled by the charming sight. He was accustomed to playing the part of the lion himself at these affairs.

"I've tried to read her stuff," he went on, "and can't make head or tail of it. I've no doubt that I'm the only person in this room honest enough to say so. . . . Have you seen Imogen since tea time?"

"No."

"I'll go and look for her."

As soon as he had gone, there entered a handsome, statuesque woman, followed by the girl who was the bride in the wedding group on the writing-table. She looked self-assured and slightly arrogant despite her youthfulness. Her husband sprang up from the settee and went to meet them.

"How do you do?" he said to his mother-in-law, in a

voice that penetrated to every corner of the room. "It's so good of you to bring my wife to see me occasionally."

His mother-in-law flushed and drew herself up. The girl shot him an angry glance as she followed her mother to the window where Elissa Durrant was still talking to Adrian Host.

At this point the door opened again slowly, and Euphemia caught a glimpse of the housemaid's face gazing at her anxiously. She rose and went out.

"What about supper, Miss?" said the housemaid.

"Supper?" said Euphemia, taken aback.

"Yes. Mr. Host said you'd be seeing to it."

"Oh . . . he told me not to do anything till tomorrow."

"E would," said the housemaid cryptically, and added: "Cook's waiting in the kitchen."

Euphemia, making a mental note of the fact that her employer's gestures were not to be taken literally, followed the maid down the hall. On the way she passed a half-open door, and, glancing through it instinctively, saw what at first looked in the dim light like a single, strangely contoured figure. Then she realised that it was Denis Callander and Imogen, strained together in a passionate embrace.

Cook, large and harassed and prepared for hostilities, stood, arms akimbo, in the middle of the kitchen.

"E told me to take my horders from you, Miss," she said, "an' no horders 'as been given an' all these people 'ere, an' what's to be done?"

Euphemia smiled—the simple, kindly, reassuring smile that lit up her heavy face. She felt no nervousness, no indignation, no apprehension. Only a detached interest in the problem, a sudden exhilarating knowledge of her capacity to deal with it.

"Well," she said, "we shall just have to manage as best we can, shan't we?"

Cook's hostility melted away like hoar frost at the touch of sunshine, and she exchanged a glance with the trim housemaid that said, "She'll do all right."

There was very little actual difficulty. The gathering, Cook said, was generally given coffee, sandwiches, cakes,

and *petits fours*. And of course, whisky. But the master saw to the whisky himself. There was plenty of material for sandwiches. There were plenty of cakes and *petits fours*. Cook's real grievance had been a sense of having been slighted in receiving no "horders." Euphemia put on an overall and set to work with Cook at the kitchen table making the sandwiches, while the housemaid arranged cakes and biscuits in dishes.

Cook, growing confidential by the time they reached the egg sandwiches, began to describe to Euphemia the obscure trouble of the intestines that had carried off her father in his prime. Euphemia in her turn told Cook of her father's death, adding that he had been a valet and her mother a housemaid. Cook felt flattered by this confidence and decided that Euphemia was a "lady." There showed in Euphemia—even on a first meeting—strangely varying elements of refinement and peasantry. Some people saw one, some the other, some both. Cook never altered or modified her opinion after that first evening.

Euphemia and the housemaid carried the refreshments into the study. Elissa Durrant was now the centre of a large group, by which Adrian Host, still smiling his pleasant, wistful smile, was completely swamped. A young man with a golden beard, wearing a peach-coloured sweater and endowed with a particularly shrill voice, occasionally succeeded in interrupting her. She watched him with her deep-set eyes till he had finished speaking, then calmly and imperturbably continued from the point at which he had broken in.

Brian Host sat on the settee by the window, flirting ostentatiously with a monocled girl whose hair was trimmed like a man's and who wore a dress of ruby velvet made in mediaeval style. A few yards away sat his wife, flirting also ostentatiously but a little more convincingly with a young man who looked like the hero of a musical comedy. Occasionally they threw furtive glances at each other. Denis and Imogen sat close together in a corner of the room. Imogen's face looked white and strained, as though this peace between them were as nerve-racking as their warfare.

They began to talk in undertones that grew suddenly louder, as—quite audibly—they resumed their quarrel. Denis raised his voice deliberately to say: "My dear, why inform the whole world that you can't bear to see me speak to another woman? It may be true, but it rather gives you away."

Imogen's cheeks flamed as she jerked away from him and crossed the room to where her father sat, listening rather despondently to Elissa Durrant's views on Formlessness as an Ideal in Art. She sat on the arm of his chair, and his arm closed about her protectively. As it did so, he shot a quick glance around for appreciation. He had been blind to what had driven her to him, but he was not blind to the picture that they made as she sat there in his embrace. He did not see her flaming cheeks, but he saw a sentence from the biography that would, he hoped, be written after his death by one of the young men or women present ("Adrian Host was essentially a family man. I shall never forget the sight of him sitting with his arm round his daughter at one of his famous literary At Homes").

Elaine had left the musical comedy hero and joined her mother, who was sitting near the table where Euphemia was pouring out tea and coffee.

"Isn't it almost time we went?" said the mother.

"You go any time. Someone will get you a taxi," replied the girl indifferently.

"My dear, you're surely not going back with Brian, after the way he's behaved. He's not apologised, has he?"

"No."

"Then you mustn't *dream* of going back with him."

"What am I to do?"

"Darling, you know how I love having you. You must come back with me, and stay with me till Brian has told you and proved to you that he's sorry."

"Oh, there are several things I've got to do in the flat. I think I'll go."

"But, darling, you mustn't tamely submit to an insult like to-night's. It's fatal."

The girl laughed shortly.

"You needn't worry about that. . . Good night, mother." She rose with slow gracefulness and went across the room to where her husband sat slouching in sulky silence next the monocled mediaeval, no longer even attempting to flirt with her.

"I'm ready to go, Brian, now, if you are," she said clearly.

He rose, looking like an abashed schoolboy, and followed her into the hall. Euphemia went out to help her on with her cloak. None of the three spoke. Then husband and wife set off down the short drive, still in silence, walking with a yard or so of space between them.

Gradually the gathering broke up. Denis Callander had been drinking whisky steadily ever since Imogen had left him, and was slightly unsteady on his feet when he rose to take his leave. He walked out of the room without looking at her. In the hall he put on his hat and coat and set off down the drive, then suddenly returned to where Euphemia stood just inside the front door, and said shortly: "Tell Imogen I want to speak to her."

Euphemia fetched Imogen from the library.

"I want to speak to you," said Denis, and drew her into the darkened drawing-room.

"I'm a beast," Euphemia heard him say thickly. "I'm sorry."

There came the sound of sudden hysterical sobbing from Imogen, then the door was closed.

Euphemia went back to the study. Elissa Durrant was the only remaining guest. She was sitting by the fireplace, opposite Adrian Host, letting him talk. He was obviously delighted by the situation, his only regret being that there was no audience. Elissa's glances, shrewd, calculating, roved about the room as if noting every detail of it. Adrian Host greeted Euphemia with his most delightful smile. An inadequate audience but better than none.

"This is Miss Tracy," he said, "my very valued house-keeper."

Elissa threw Euphemia a brilliant glance that seemed to

pass through her to something beyond. Euphemia began to gather up the cups and saucers upon a tray.

Denis and Imogen entered the room. Imogen's thin, child's face looked pale and ravaged. Her eyes were swollen with weeping. But she was taut and eager, like something dancing at the end of a wire.

"We're going on to Billy's, father," she said. "Denis says that he told him he was having people. There'll be something going on there, anyway."

"All right, my darling," said Adrian Host affectionately. "So long as you're happy that's all that matters to me. Take care of her, Denis, my boy."

"I will, sir," said Denis.

It was curious how Adrian Host seemed to be able to draw the right responses from people. He gave his cues with such confidence that people returned them automatically.

XV

EUPHEMIA had been Mr. Host's housekeeper for four weeks. She had a pleasant little sitting-room on the first floor overlooking the garden. There was a large round table in the middle of the room, a Windsor arm-chair by the fireplace, and against the wall an old-fashioned dresser on which stood a well-filled wicker mending basket. By the door was a small writing-desk supporting a housekeeping ledger and a neat stack of tradesmen's books. The geranium was on the window-sill.

She had found the work of housekeeping unexpectedly easy. She was naturally methodical and receptive, full of an eager zest for life in all its aspects. There was to her something thrilling in the smallest detail of her new duties. Her memories of her mother's lessons in the domestic routine of Haydon Court were so clear and vivid that she found it an easy matter to adapt them to the smaller organism of the Hampstead house. Moreover, being utterly lacking in vanity and self-consciousness, she was ready to learn from anyone—the cook, the housemaid, or even the kitchenmaid.

Cook was a stout, healthy woman whose ruling passion was an interest in disease. Her repertoire of death-bed scenes was unique, and Euphemia listened to it enthralled. The trim housemaid, Emily, had large blue eyes whose saucer-like quality she deliberately exaggerated, and hair whose natural fairness was enhanced by frequent applications of peroxide. She cherished secret ambitions of "going on the films" and had a series of love affairs with the youths of the neighbourhood—affairs that seemed to on-

lookers to be wholly colourless, but that she endowed with a rich supply of dramatic situations borrowed from the cinemas she visited so frequently.

Maggie, the kitchenmaid, was an under-sized child of fourteen who had just left school and whose entire existence centred in her young brother of two called "Helbert." She would bring Euphemia the latest news of him each morning with shining eyes and cheeks flushed beneath the covering of grime that they seemed to acquire the moment she set foot in the house. ("E's got another tooth through, this mornin', Miss" . . . "E said 'Sissy' plain as plain last night, Miss.") On the days when Helbert was off colour, Maggie would go about, her small face pale and set beneath its smudges, her whole being concentrated in passionate silent prayers to God to cure Helbert of his cold or earache. Such was Euphemia's interest in Helbert that she never felt quite at ease till she had received the morning's bulletin. She rejoiced with Maggie at each tooth that "got through," she thrilled with Maggie at Helbert's marvellous intelligence. On her "afternoon off" Maggie occasionally brought Helbert in his push-cart to the Hampstead house, and there was no doubt at all that Helbert "took to" Euphemia.

It was perhaps fortunate for Euphemia that Mr. Host's sister (who had married an artist and gone to live in Italy) had been very unpopular with the kitchen staff. She had been over-supplied with "airs" and had demanded continual attention.

The only other member of the staff besides herself and the maids was Miss Pearson, Mr. Host's part-time secretary, who came in the mornings to type from his dictation. She was a plain, silent girl with prominent eyes, who always looked tired despite the lightness of her work. Mr. Host seldom alluded to her, but when he did it was with a faintly amused contempt: "The worthy Miss Pearson." "Our friend, the typewriter."

Euphemia found Adrian Host the most bewildering part of her new world. She could never discover exactly in what capacity she was supposed to stand to him. At one

moment he would treat her as an honoured guest, the next as an old family retainer (new acquaintances were often under the impression that she had been his children's nurse), and the next as an automaton. Euphemia tried to respond adequately to each cue. He reminded her of a small boy who had lived near her father's cottage and who always greeted her, if she were in the garden when he passed, with the sound of some animal. They never exchanged any other greeting. Euphemia would wait to see whether he said "Miaow" or "Bow-wow" or "Baa" before she replied. When she had replied he would pass on, his face beaming with pleasure.

Though always scrupulously courteous and never bad-tempered, her employer was a man of changing moods. On some days he was boyishly high-spirited, on others dejected, silent, brooding.

Occasionally the plain, tired-looking secretary would whisper to Euphemia the cause of the day's mood. "Quite a good notice of 'Autumn Leaves' in the *Daily Post*" . . . "A *sweet* letter from someone in Canada this morning" . . . or indignantly, "Not a *mention* of 'Autumn Leaves' in the 'Best Autumn Book' review in the *Morning Telegraph*" . . . Jealousy, of course."

The little secretary, alone of all his household, saw him as he saw himself.

As time went on she became more confidential to Euphemia.

"I've read every one of his books," she said earnestly, "over and over again. They're the most beautiful books that have ever been written. And when you know him you don't wonder, because he's the most beautiful character who's ever lived . . . And the more I see of him, the more I realise it."

"He's lucky to have someone so sympathetic to work for him," smiled Euphemia.

"Oh, Miss Tracy," gasped the little secretary, "I hardly ever *speak* to him. I *daren't*. I admire him too much. When I sit there taking down the words as he says them in his beautiful voice and knowing that I'm the first person in

the whole world to receive them—well, it *paralyses* me. I couldn't *possibly* tell him how wonderful I think his work is. It would seem like impertinence coming from me. . . ."

It seemed strange that Adrian Host, avid as he was for the admiration of people with whom he made the most casual contacts (he would stage an elaborate scene to impress the boy who brought the papers and then suffer agonies of humiliation in case it had missed its effect), should work day after day with this girl and remain unaware of her admiration. The explanation, of course, was that he was afflicted with the curious self-distrust of the very conceited, and, though he was acutely sensitive to the most tenuous slight, he could never be satisfied with any admiration that was not expressed in exaggerated terms of flattery.

Euphemia saw little of her employer's daughter. Like a bright restless flame she shot into the house and out of it again, accompanied by Denis Callander or some other of her friends. She and Denis quarrelled and made up their quarrels continually. The antagonism that underlay their love seemed to grow more bitter as the time fixed for their marriage approached. Each seemed to take a perverse pleasure in hurting the other. Denis, especially, had neither shame nor reticence when the desire to hurt her was upon him.

Of Brian and his wife, too, Euphemia saw little. Occasionally Brian would come in at tea time, eat an enormous tea, discuss the latest sporting news at great detail, remark without apparent resentment that he had not seen his wife for two or three days as she was staying at "the old hag's" for a "hellish bun fight of some sort," and depart as abruptly as he had appeared.

Elissa Durrant, however, was a frequent visitor. Euphemia gathered that her friendship with Adrian Host was of recent growth and was not approved of by the household.

"She's got *designs* on him," whispered the little secretary unhappily. "I *feel* it. I *know* it. And she's not good enough for him. She's clever, of course—she does the book reviews for the *Helicon* now, you know—but—oh, every-

thing she writes is so hard and cynical. She's—she's not *good* enough for him."

There was no doubt that Adrian Host was flattered by the friendship. It excited him so much that on the mornings after her visits he would suddenly stop dictating and stare absently out of the window, while his little secretary waited, her prominent eyes filled with ludicrous dismay. ("Because though it's *impossible* for him to write a word that's not distinguished, Miss Tracy—that's what the *Northcote Echo* said and it's *true*—still, his work's not *quite* what it was before she started popping in.")

Elissa Durrant prided herself on being unconventional. She would arrive at odd times, wearing odd toilets, fix upon Emily the brilliant black eyes that seemed to look through people without seeing them, say "Is Mr. Host at home?" then sweep past her into the library without waiting for an answer. There she would sink into a chair or upon the hearthrug, turn the brilliant black eyes upon Adrian, and either talk to him or let him talk, till suddenly she would rise to her feet and leave him without ceremony. The author's gratification was purely literary. He was flattered by her notice and took it as a tribute to his work. He looked forward to the time when she would write one of her famous articles on him in the *Helicon*, fixing for ever his place in literature.

He found her visits rather exhausting, however, and it worried him to be interrupted so continually at his work.

On Euphemia's free afternoons she would sally forth on the joyous adventure of discovering London. No millionaire ever enjoyed a luxury trip through the beauty spots of Europe as Euphemia enjoyed her rides through London on the top of a 'bus. She liked the left-hand front corner seat, and, if it were occupied, she would sit as near to it as she could, ready to pounce upon it the minute it was free.

She soon learnt the intricacies of the 'bus service, and knew where to get down in order to walk along the Embankment, watching the barges and the seagulls, or to

explore the streets of the East End, where fascinating market stalls lined the pavements surrounded by a throng of shabby, cheerful customers, and to wander down quaint old streets untouched for centuries. She saw it all in terms of People. The figures hurrying to and fro on the pavement, hurled along in motor cars, sitting or standing in the rooms of which she caught fugitive glances in the buildings she passed, seemed to send tiny threads of flame to feed the fire in her heart. Hundreds and thousands of people living hundreds of thousands of separate lives, but all bound together by invisible, intangible threads, instinct with the mystery of Life. Even the buildings and monuments she saw in terms of People. Passing the National Gallery on the top of a 'bus, she would say to herself: "Someone thought of that, saw it just like that before a single stone was put to it. He lay awake in the night, sometimes feeling pleased and proud, sometimes worrying over the difficulties. Then other people set to work to build it, climbing over it like insects, not taking much interest in it, thinking about their own concerns as they worked. Perhaps the man who put that stone just there was going to be married the next day. Perhaps the man that put that one died before the building was finished. . ."

The thought of the thousands of people of whom she caught fleeting glimpses in the street or from 'buses fascinated and thrilled her. "You'll never see that woman again in all your life," she would say to herself, "she doesn't know you've seen her now, but she'll go on living—worrying, planning, having little troubles and joys, getting up in the morning, going to bed at night—all the rest of her life. . . Some day when you're sitting down to dinner, perhaps, she'll begin to feel ill, and the next week she'll die, and you'll never know. Or perhaps you'll die, just when she's setting off to a theatre with her husband, and she'll never know. Perhaps she's very proud of that hat she's wearing . . . she saved up for a long time to buy it, and she's seeing herself in it all the time as she walks along. Perhaps she doesn't like it . . . she'd wanted a better one but

couldn't afford it. . . Perhaps she's feeling excited about something . . . perhaps worried . . . perhaps frightened. . . You'll never know. You'll never know anything more about her all your life. But you've *seen* her just this once. . ."

On Sunday afternoon she went to visit Miss Cliffe at the Belgravia Ladies' Residential Club and had tea with her in the tiny office that seemed to be entirely taken up by the large writing-table, the two shabby basket chairs, and an elaborate wireless apparatus from which Miss Cliffe could seldom elicit anything but atmospheric and in which she had now completely lost interest. Miss Cliffe's attitude towards Euphemia was one of anxious responsibility. She had had her little triumph over Mrs. Lancaster, but the triumph might, after all, be short lived. It depended on whether Euphemia "gave satisfaction." Mrs. Lancaster was lying low, being bland and pleasant and non-committal. She had not mentioned Euphemia's appointment since she had heard of it, but Miss Cliffe suspected that she had prepared some suavely stinging comments ready for use when she heard of Euphemia's dismissal.

"You do your hair the way I taught you?" said Miss Cliffe, as she poured out tea from her favourite brown earthenware pot.

"Yes."

Euphemia took off her hat and showed the sleek waves of brown hair ending in the neat bun at the nape of her neck.

"It takes me much longer than the old way," she said, "but I always do it."

She spoke with conscious virtue, like a child who performs a disagreeable duty.

"And you wear the brown skirt and blouse every day?"

"Yes."

Euphemia replied without enthusiasm. She disliked the brown coat and skirt. Her taste remained the taste of the woman who had clothed her large body in frills and fichus.

"And the navy blue on Sundays?"

"Yes."

"And the black one in the evenings?"

"Yes."

"And remember that you promised not to buy *anything* without me. Not even a handkerchief or a pair of stockings."

"I know," said Euphemia, "I haven't done."

Still Miss Cliffe was not quite satisfied. Figure of dignified respectability as Euphemia was, Miss Cliffe was uneasily aware of some incalculable force behind it. Despite her apparent staidness, Euphemia was capable of "kicking over the traces," as Miss Cliffe put it to herself, and so exposing Miss Cliffe to the exultant triumph of Mrs. Lancaster.

"If you're ever in any doubt as to what to do, you'll come and ask me, won't you?" she went on. "I mean—don't do anything rash."

Euphemia promised not to do anything rash.

After tea Euphemia went into the lounge. Mrs. Lewes was sitting by the fire crocheting. She did not recognise Euphemia, and, thinking she was a newcomer, began to tell her all about Dolly and Hugh and Derek and Beatrice, taking the latest weekly letter from her bag to read aloud. There was a tall, angular woman wearing six or seven necklaces of varying lengths whom Euphemia had not seen before. She looked bored and listless till she heard that Euphemia was Adrian Host's housekeeper, then her long frame galvanised into sudden life and her necklaces jingled excitedly.

"Oh, my dear, how thrilling! I adore his books. There's a sort of—of whimsical charm about them that's perfectly delightful. And you can always be sure of their being *nice*. . . . I should imagine that he's a charming man, isn't he?"

Euphemia said that he was.

"I'm a—" she paused for a moment, pursuing an elusive word in her mind, brought out "*carnivorous* reader" with an air of triumph, then hurried on as if suddenly suspecting that the elusive word had, after all, succeeded in elud-

ing her, "but it's *difficult*, isn't it? Don't you find it so? I mean, by the time you've got a book that everyone's talking about from the library and found time to read it, everyone's talking about quite another one, and it's all so much wasted labour. I do honestly think that far too many books are published. I know I read all I can, but people are always talking about books I've not read."

There was a worn and breathless look about her that was evidently the result of her efforts to keep up with the literary output of her generation.

Miss Cliffe saw Euphemia off at the front door.

"Now don't forget," she said earnestly, "come to me in any difficulty, and don't do anything rash."

XVI

It was the day of Adrian Host's next At Home. He had told Euphemia that Mrs. Lancaster and Dr. Marriott would probably be there, and the news had made her feel vaguely excited. She had only met Dr. Marriott once, but her memory of him was curiously vivid—the tall, spare frame, the keen, rather tired eyes, the strong gentle lines of the mouth. She did not particularly want to see him again, she certainly did not want to speak to him, but the thought of him brought the same pleasant glow to her heart as did the thought of the Market Felton 'bus conductor and the Hyde Park policeman. It helped to round off the world for her, making it a more satisfactory place than it would have been without it.

Cook was gloomily excited over the case of a second cousin who was suffering from jaundice.

"I've never seen a jaundice case," she said wistfully. "They say the colour's a proper treat."

"Emily and I can manage this evening," Euphemia had assured her. "You go and have a look at your cousin. Take her something to cheer her up. And, when Emily's helped me take in the things, she can go, too. I expect that Perce could do with you this evening, couldn't he, Emily?"

Emily smiled—the smile that had been painstakingly copied from Greta Garbo.

"Thank you, Miss. He'll be in the seventh 'eaven over it."

All Perce's feelings were of this violent nature according to Emily, belying his lethargic appearance and limited vocabulary.

Euphemia was glad to be left in charge of the supper.

On one of her London voyages of discovery she had bought a second-hand cookery book in Charing Cross Road containing a chapter on sandwiches.

Cook, who was intensely conservative, watched her preparations with disapproval.

"I don't 'old with it, Miss," she said, shaking her head, "sandwiches is egg or tongue or 'am or paste. 'There's something 'eathenish in them things you're makin'. 'They're not natural."

Euphemia laughed the slow sympathetic chuckle that Cook always found disarming. And, in any case, with the thought of the visit to her jaundiced cousin before her, Cook was not in a mood to take offence.

Elissa Durrant had rung up at the last moment to say that she could not come. The author was obviously torn between chagrin and relief. He would miss the brightest jewel of his literary crown, but on the other hand he would have the satisfaction of hearing the sound of his own voice.

The youth with the beard and peach-coloured sweater arrived first and managed to read a poem aloud while the gathering was too small to ignore him. The usual habitués drifted in one by one—an uninspiring little company, depending, most of them, on peculiarities of dress and manner for their title to fame, suspicious of each other, agreeing only in their depreciation of established names. One man with an upstanding tuft of hair on the top of his head kept telling people in a shrill voice of an anachronism he had discovered in a historical novel published that week. "The expression namby-pamby used fifty years before Pope or Ambrose Philips were born." He was intensely proud of having discovered the slip and talked of it incessantly.

Mrs. Lancaster was among the later arrivals. She looked charming in a black velvet cloak whose ruched collar stood up picturesquely about her beautifully coiffeured white head.

She greeted Euphemia with a vague nod as if she thought she might have met her before but was not quite sure, and followed her up to the bedroom that was used as a ladies' cloakroom and whose only other occupant was a girl with

plucked eyebrows and a very high forehead who was rather self-consciously smoking a meerschauum.

"So delightful, these literary affairs," purred Mrs. Lancaster, throwing a quick appreciative glance at her reflection and patting her white fluffy hair.

"I think they're damnable," said the girl. "I come because occasionally one can get hold of someone useful. They say Elissa Durrant was here last week. Just my darned luck to have missed her."

"Really?" said Mrs. Lancaster with polite interest.

Mrs. Lancaster had determined to make the most of her evening and to remember all the names that were mentioned in order that her description of it later in the Belgravia Ladies' Residential Club might be as impressive as possible. Poor Brenda had been longing to come. Geoffrey had asked her if she would care to bring a friend with her, but—well, it would be far more pleasant to describe the affair with just the *slightest* readjustments over their cup of tea tonight than to have Brenda hanging on to her like a limpet (and an unattractive limpet at that) all the evening. Elissa Durrant . . . she had been there last week, so there could be very little exaggeration in telling dear Brenda that she was there this week. The importance of all these people ("You'll find a rag, tag, and bobtail of literary nonentities there," Geoffrey had said unkindly) could be slightly enhanced as she described them.

She swept gracefully from the room, making an almost imperceptible inclination of the head as she passed Euphemia. "She doesn't recognise me," thought Euphemia, following her down the stairs, and felt a little thrill of amused excitement like a child that has disguised itself and deceived a grown-up.

Dr. Marriott, who was standing in the hall, came forward at once to greet Euphemia, shaking her by the hand as if they were old friends.

"How-do-you-do, Miss Tracy? I don't suppose you remember me. I met you in the Belgravia Club. I was delighted when I heard that you were coming here."

Mrs. Lancaster had turned away to talk to a woman

wearing an orange smock embroidered in green with the signs of the Zodiac, who at once informed Mrs. Lancaster that her aura was mauve with splashes of crimson. Mrs. Lancaster expressed a perfunctory interest. She was thinking: Really, Geoffrey's *quite* impossible sometimes. He's not even been introduced to the woman. . . One *doesn't* greet one's host's domestic staff as if they were old friends. She was relieved when Euphemia disappeared into the kitchen, and was slightly distant in her manner to Geoffrey in order to let him see that he had made a *faux pas*.

The evening that followed was a dull one. Even Mrs. Lancaster could perceive that, and it made her congratulate herself once more on not having brought dear Brenda. The affair she would describe to dear Brenda would be a much more brilliant affair than this. Neither Imogen nor Denis nor Elaine nor Brian were there, so that the author missed his familiar and favourite setting of family man and reminded one of an actor disconcerted by finding the chair from which he is wont to deliver his monologue missing from its accustomed place.

It was a relief to everyone when the door opened to admit Euphemia and Emily with the coffee and sandwiches. The placidity and sanity of Euphemia's bearing brought a vague reassurance to the author. He broke off his monologue on the Technique of the Novel, and came forward to take the tray from her hands with a courtly gesture. She saw at once that it was one of his "my dear old friend" moments, and, responding automatically, tried to assume the expression of one who had been his children's nurse.

"Food for the body," he said gaily. "Often, I'm afraid, more acceptable to us than food for the mind. We are always glad to see our dear Tracy and her burden."

At once Mrs. Lancaster was to the fore, assuming proprietorship over Euphemia, taking her under her wing as a protégée, telling everyone the story of Euphemia and the burglar.

She did recognise me, thought Euphemia. She was waiting to see whether I was a success here or not. . .

Her life since her father died had consisted in a series of battles between the romanticism of her frustrated youth and her native peasant shrewdness. On this occasion, as on all the others, her native shrewdness won the victory, so that Mrs. Lancaster seemed to shrink in some curious way before her eyes, to become actually smaller than she had been before. Yet so devoid of vanity was Euphemia that she felt no humiliation, and the smile with which she replied to Mrs. Lancaster was the amused, understanding smile of a nurse who has caught a small charge in a piece of childish snobbishness.

Euphemia, however, had little time for conversation. She was kept busy pouring out cups of tea and coffee as fast as she could pour them. Then came a lull and she was left standing alone behind her service table.

Glancing around, she noticed a man at the opposite end of the room, tall, burly, thick-set, with the indefinable air of one who has lived in the open. He looked strikingly out of place in this gathering.

Meeting her eyes, he suddenly walked across the room to her and said:

"I thought Miss Host would be here."

"She generally is," said Euphemia, "but she doesn't seem to have turned up tonight."

"You don't know if she's coming?"

"No. I haven't seen her today."

"She told me about these affairs and gave me a sort of general invitation to turn up at one." His eyes wandered round the room with dispassionate contempt. "It's not much in my line, but I thought there was a chance of seeing her here."

"She may turn up yet," suggested Euphemia reassuringly.

"Oh yes, I'll stick it. It seems a queer idea of pleasure to me, but I'll stick it. . . I've been trying to see her all the week, but I've not been able to run into her." He lowered his voice and spoke confidentially, "I suppose she is engaged to young Callander?"

"Yes. They're to be married next spring."

"I was at school with him, you know. Hated him like poison. He's not improved either. . . Mind you, if I thought he'd make her happy I'd clear off back to Africa without speaking to her again, but—well, as it is I'm not clearing. I don't know why I'm telling you all this." He grinned suddenly. "Yes, I do. You're an old friend of the family, and I want to get you on my side. I'm hoping that you hate that young swine."

"I'm not exactly an old friend of the family," said Euphemia, with a twinkle. "I've only been here just over a month. And I hardly ever see her. I've not spoken half a dozen words to her since I came. She'd never take any notice of anything I said even if I had the impudence to say anything, but still," she smiled at him, "I'll do all I can."

"Thank you," he said.

Dr. Marriott was coming up to the table with two cups.

"My name's Peter Cornish," said the big man abruptly as he turned away.

"How do you like Hampstead?" said Dr. Marriott as she filled the two cups.

"Very much."

"Did you know London before?"

"No. I'd never been out of the village where I was born."

"You know no one here, then?"

"No . . . except Miss Cliffe."

"What do you do with yourself in your free time?"

"Oh, I—go about," said Euphemia vaguely. Mere words seemed incapable of expressing the thrill of her voyages of discovery.

"You must let me take you out some time. . ." he said.

The woman in the orange smock suddenly screamed, "What *fascinating* sandwiches, Mr. Host! *Marvellous!* I've never tasted anything so intriguing. Hundreds of different sorts and all different. What *is* in them?"

Adrian Host looked vaguely gratified.

"Our dear Tracy is responsible," he said. "She runs the house, and we are all as wax in her hands. I'm afraid

that her efforts are often wasted as far as I'm concerned. When I'm deep in a piece of work I don't know what I've had for a meal or even whether I've had a meal or not."

They all suddenly surrounded Euphemia, demanding to know the contents of their sandwiches.

"This one's heavenly, what is it?"

"It's chopped shrimps and chutney," explained Euphemia, "and that's cream cheese and chopped celery . . . and that's minced lamb and cucumber. . ."

"And what's *this*? . . . it's *luscious*!"

It was a welcome diversion in a very dull evening. Their excitement communicated itself to Euphemia.

"I enjoy trying anything fresh," she said. "When I was nursing my father I used to sit reading a cookery book for hours. And whenever I got the chance I tried something new. . . The only part of the book I've never had a chance of trying was the sweet part. Toffees, you know. What they call confectionery. But I know the recipes by heart, and I've made them all often enough in my mind."

The girl with the meerschaum gave a scream.

"Let's make toffee. Now. All of us. May we, Mr. Host? Come along, Tracy darling, and tell us how."

Laughing and chattering, they swept like a torrent into the empty kitchen, left clean and tidy by Emily. They opened drawers and cupboards and scuffled for the possession of aprons and spoons.

"Tell us what to do, Tracy."

Euphemia divided them into groups, doled out materials, and apportioned to each group a gas ring on the stove.

After the first moment of bewilderment, Adrian Host had decided that it was delightful and that it would make a charming little incident in the biography. As he wandered about among them, smiling pleasantly, he was in imagination engaged in reading that chapter of the biography ("Few of us will forget the sight of Adrian Host making toffee in his kitchen and inspiring us all with his own amazing joy of life").

Mrs. Lancaster stood by the door, her lips drawn into their gracious smile. Behind the smile she was furious.

Her eyes kept wandering as if fascinated to the figure of Euphemia. It had lost its air of groomed primness. Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes bright, her hair fell untidily about her face. All her overalls had been appropriated by the toffee-makers, and she wore one of Emily's that was too small for her and that pulled unbecomingly across her large breasts. There was a smear of toffee mixture on the end of her nose. Mrs. Lancaster felt the same fierce revulsion that she had felt when first she saw her standing in the hall of the Belgravia Ladies' Club holding the bulging string bag, and later when she saw her struggling with the burglar on the landing.

Peter Cornish worked apart from the others, engrossed in the making of a sweet that he had invented himself and had often made in Africa.

They would not wait till the things were cold, of course, but ate them as hot as they could bear them--pulling out strings of candy like elastic with screams of laughter, eating glutinous Turkish delight and cocoanut ice, sampling each other's products, making the half-set mixtures into odd, fantastic shapes. Emily came back and stared at the scene, her eyes and mouth wide open, thinking at first that they had gone mad. The appearance of Emily broke the spell, and they discovered suddenly that they ought to have gone home ages ago and crowded under the kitchen tap, washing fingers and mouths. They were still animatedly discussing the toffee-making as they set off in little groups of two and three down the drive. Only Peter Cornish remained. He had returned to the library with Mr. Host and sat there, silent, massive, staring in front of him, showing no signs of departure. The author was eyeing him askance, wondering who he was and why he had come. Quite obviously he was not anyone who Counted. He had made no response whatever to his attempts at literary conversation. Euphemia, gathering together cups and saucers, was wondering whether it devolved upon her to get rid of him, when there came a sharp and prolonged knocking at the front door. She went to answer it herself. In the darkness she could see three figures. The middle one was Imogen;

on one side of her was Denis Callander and on the other a man with a slouch hat whom Euphemia did not know. He was half supporting Imogen, and at first Euphemia thought that she had had an accident. Then he said sheepishly, "I say, Imogen's a bit canned, so we've brought her along."

He helped her into the hall. Denis followed unsteadily.

"She's only a bit——" began Denis, then swayed and took hold of the hat-stand for support.

"We had a quarrel," he said in thick, blurred tones, "quarrel—an' we got recon—recon—made it up—an' we had a glass or two to cele—cele—brate an' got a bit tight, thash all."

Imogen let Euphemia put an arm about her.

"He's been a beast all evening," she said indistinctly.

"I know I'm tight. . . I don't care."

She freed herself suddenly from Euphemia's arms, took an unsteady step towards Denis, then stopped. The door of the library had opened, and Peter Cornish had come out. The door that he had left ajar was immediately shut quietly from inside. There was a moment's silence while Imogen and Peter Cornish stared at each other. Then Denis hiccupped and said, "She's as drunk as an owl. So'm I."

Peter Cornish walked up to him.

"Get out," he said.

Denis drew himself up with ludicrous dignity.

"Who're you talking to?" he said.

"Get out," said Peter Cornish again between his teeth.

A degree of soberness seemed to come to Denis. He laughed with an attempt at bravado, then turned on his heel and, guided by his companion, made his way down the drive.

"Come, lovey," said Euphemia, drawing Imogen again into her arms.

She helped her upstairs, while Peter Cornish stood in the hall, watching them till they were out of sight.

Then he took his hat from the hall table and departed.

Euphemia put Imogen to bed as if she had been a child.

The episode downstairs seemed to have sobered her as it had sobered Denis, but she did not speak, did not answer even when Euphemia, having sponged her face and hands, said "Good night, dearie," and went softly from the room.

Downstairs Euphemia paused for a moment outside the author's door, then knocked and entered.

He was seated at his desk before a little pile of manuscript, though it was not his custom to work on Sunday evenings. Looking up at her, he began to speak quickly, breathlessly.

"A great success, your toffee-making, Miss Tracy . . . a great success. We must repeat it some day . . . though an impromptu affair repeated generally lacks the original verve. . ."

"Mr. Host——" she began.

He interrupted her.

"Yes, yes, Miss Tracy. I know you want to take the things out, but if you'd leave everything till the morning I'd be very grateful. I'm just settling down to an important piece of work. . ."

His smile was set and strained, and held a hint of entreaty. His face was pale. She remembered the stealthy shutting of the library door.

He wanted to pretend to himself that he did not know. He was begging her not to tell him. . .

He heaved a sigh of relief as, without speaking again, she turned and went from the room.

XVII

ADRIAN HOST's new novel *Dead Fires* came out in the autumn. On receiving his twelve presentation copies, the backs of the jackets covered with enthusiastic accounts of his earlier works, the author shrugged deprecatingly and murmured, "The inevitable publisher's blurb," but he went about all day with a smile from which the usual hint of fear and anxiety had vanished, and whenever anyone entered the library it was obvious that he had hastily laid the book aside and was pretending to busy himself with something else. This moment, as even he realised, was the only moment of unclouded joy that his life contained.

"What's 'appened to the master?" said Maggie. "'E's smilin' like as if 'e wanted to dance."

"One of 'is books out," said Emily contemptuously. "'E's always like this the day one of his books is out. Then them little yeller envelopes starts comin' an' down 'e goes."

"It's his best," whispered little Miss Pearson to Euphemia. "It's a *masterpiece*. All the time he was dictating it to me I knew it was. It makes you want to laugh and cry at the same time. I do hope that the critics will do it justice."

Photographers wrote to ask for sittings, and Adrian Host was whimsically rueful.

"Why, oh *why* won't people leave one alone? Why should a shy man be condemned to the agony of being photographed merely because he's written a book that a few kind people say they like?"

But he had the brown imperial carefully trimmed and set off to the appointment, wearing a new suit.

He had given Euphemia a copy of the book, and she had read it conscientiously. All the characters in it were charming, and all of them vaguely suggested Adrian Host.

The press cuttings began to arrive. "Quite good, on the whole," whispered Miss Pearson confidentially to Euphemia. "Provincial ones mostly. Some of them horrid and sneery, of course, calling it saccharine and things like that. I always know that those are written by people who have tried to write books like his and haven't been able to. Jealousy, you know. . . But I wish the London people would hurry up. It's rather depressing for him having to wait so long for the London papers."

Some press cuttings disappeared as soon as Adrian Host had read them. Others were left lying about on his desk for several days before they were put away. Adrian Host liked to think of Emily's having read them when she dusted the library.

"I simply can't think why certain papers ignore his work," said Miss Pearson. She was sitting in Euphemia's room, drinking the cup of tea for which she always came at eleven o'clock in the morning, allowing herself quarter of an hour. "Not a moment more, Miss Tracy. He always gives himself a quarter of an hour's break, and I always like to go away while he's having it. He walks to and fro, you know, smoking and planning his work, and it seems presumptuous of me to stay in the room then, though, of course, in Miss Host's time I'd nowhere else to go. . . What was I saying? Oh, I know. How certain papers ignore him. It's a sort of conspiracy, and, as I've told you, jealousy's at the bottom of it. Well, it stands to reason, doesn't it?"

Euphemia looked at her. She was plain and sallow, with a blunt nose and a large mouth. There was something earnest and childlike about her. Her hair was her best feature, coarse, of a nondescript colour, but wiry and springy with a loose, natural wave. She looked tired, as usual, and there were dark lines round her eyes. Euphemia was not listening to what she said. She was thinking: Why does she always look tired? The work can't be hard.

She realised suddenly that she knew nothing about Miss Pearson except that she appeared punctually at nine o'clock every morning, sat through lunch in silence, and vanished immediately afterwards. Their only subject of conversation—or rather Miss Pearson's only subject of conversation—had been the perfection of Adrian Host.

"Do you live in rooms?" said Euphemia suddenly.

Miss Pearson seemed to bring her thoughts down from the subject of her employer's affairs to her own with difficulty.

"No. I live with my married sister. At Highgate. She's not well off, and, of course, it helps her out and it's cheap for me. I mean, you couldn't get decent rooms for a pound a week. She won't let me pay her more."

Euphemia was looking at the rings of weariness round the slightly protruding blue eyes.

"This is quite an easy job, isn't it?" she said. "Or do you find that it takes a lot out of you?"

"This job? Oh no, it's very easy. I often feel that it's wrong of me to take such good pay for it. But, of course, I won't pretend that I'd really *like* to take less. My sister's got four children, and it's nice to be able to help her a bit. I mean, buy clothes for them sometimes and that sort of thing."

"And what do you generally do with your afternoons?"

Euphemia was hot-foot on the scent of the little secretary's life. She could not have told why it was so important that she should know all about it, but somehow it was.

"Oh, I help my sister. Her husband's only a clerk, you see, and there's very little money. And you know what it is with four children. There's a good deal to do in the afternoons and evenings. My sister isn't strong, you know. She suffers from nerves. I'm awfully lucky to have got a post where I can earn a bit of money and help her as well."

Her sallow face was shining. Her sister puts on her, thought Euphemia. She slaves for the lot of them. But she's happy. She's the sort that wouldn't be happy any other way.

The barrier down, Miss Pearson's confidences came out in an eager stream. No sister had ever been so perfect as Miss Pearson's sister, no children so perfect as Miss Pearson's sister's children.

"It doesn't bore you frightfully, does it? I mean, when I once begin to talk about them, I *do* get rather boring. I wouldn't have mentioned them, of course, if you hadn't asked about them. But Bobby's awfully sweet. He's the second one, you know. He says the most screaming things. And the baby's a darling. She's only two, and she can say almost anything. She's ever so quick. . . . Now do say if all this is boring you."

But it wasn't boring Euphemia. No detail about the little family was too slight for her. The thought of it stirred in her that excitement that all human contacts stirred in her. Moreover, a curious sense of responsibility for the little secretary had suddenly come to her, taking her by surprise.

"Don't you ever take an afternoon off and go shopping or to a theatre?" she said. "Don't you ever want to have a good time like Miss Host?"

"Oh no! Not like *that*. I am fond of the theatre, but—well, somehow, I've not been to anything for ages."

"You could manage to take an afternoon off, couldn't you?"

"Oh yes. My sister's always telling me to go out and enjoy myself one afternoon."

"Well, I've never been to a theatre in my life, so suppose you and I go up to one on Wednesday afternoon."

Miss Pearson's pale blue eyes gleamed.

"Oh, that would be lovely," she said. "I shall simply dream of it."

She looked at her watch and leapt to her feet. "I must go now. He'll be ready. Yes, I shall simply *dream* of it, Miss Tracy."

On the Wednesday morning Miss Pearson arrived in a state of suppressed excitement, wearing a saxe-blue dress that had a gala if home-made appearance. It was clear that

only a very small proportion of Miss Pearson's generous salary went to supply her own needs.

"I hardly slept last night," she confided to Euphemia over the eleven o'clock cup of tea. "I've not been so excited for years. Edie and Bert sometimes go to the pictures, but I don't care for them. In any case, of course, I'd rather stay with the children and let Edie go out, because she gets so low, cooped up with them all day. Anyway, with the pictures you never forget that they *are* the pictures, do you? A play's different. It's *real*, somehow. . ."

They had decided to go to a revival of *Quality Street* at the Haymarket. Euphemia would have preferred *King Lear* at the Old Vic, but Miss Pearson had decided against Shakespeare. "He's a bit *dreary*, Miss Tracy," she said. "I did him at school, you know, and—well, he's *dreary*. There's no getting away from it."

She met Euphemia in the hall after lunch. The saxe-blue coat was slightly less successful even than the saxe-blue dress, but Euphemia looked at it with wistful envy. There was something gay and gallant about it, despite its cobbled seams and badly fitting shoulders. The collar was elaborate and the coat ended in a row of frills. . . That it had failed of its aim was only too evident, but it was evident also that it had aimed high. Euphemia glanced with distaste at the reflection of her own plain dark-brown tailored coat.

"So sorry I've kept you waiting," said Miss Pearson gaily, drawing on a pair of cotton gloves.

Then, just as they were starting towards the door, the telephone bell rang. Miss Pearson took down the receiver.

"Yes? . . . Yes, Edie. . . It's I. . . Hetty. . ." There was no mistaking the sound of hysterical sobbing that followed. It was clearly audible even to Euphemia. The faint sallow colour started from Miss Pearson's face, leaving it blanched. "I'll come. . . I'll come at once. . ."

The hysterical sobs were succeeded by a torrent of tearful words. The faint colour returned to Miss Pearson's face. She drew a deep breath of relief and smiled reassuringly into the telephone.

"It's all right, Edie. I'll come. I'll come now. No, we hadn't got tickets, so it won't matter a bit. . . No, of course she won't mind. I'll explain to her. I'll be back in half an hour. I'm so sorry . . . it is a shame. Yes . . . good-bye, darling."

She put back the receiver and turned to Euphemia with a little nervous laugh. She looked breathless and shaken, but there was still a great relief in her face.

"I'm so sorry. . . I can't go. . . It was my sister. . . I thought at first that one of them had had an accident, but it was only—they're being naughty, and it does so upset her. . . She suffers from her nerves, you know. . . I can't leave her to wrestle with them all afternoon. . . I should be *miserable*. You *do* understand, don't you?"

"Yes," said Euphemia, "we'll put it off till next month."

"Yes . . . that would be lovely. . . I'll go now. . . I must hurry back to her. She'll be worrying in case she's spoilt my afternoon. Things upset her so. . . It's her nerves."

She took a hasty farewell of Euphemia and set off, almost running down the road in her haste to get back to her sister.

Euphemia went slowly upstairs to take off her things. In imagination she was with Miss Pearson, hurrying through Highgate to an ugly, poky little house and a thin, peevish, overworked woman who "suffered from her nerves." Or perhaps it wasn't an ugly, poky little house. And perhaps the sister who "suffered from her nerves" wasn't thin and overworked. She felt an uncontrollable desire to know what the house and the sister were like. She had the address, of course, and she could easily find her way there, but—— She imagined herself walking into the little house, looking about her and saying, "Well, I just came to see what it was like." One couldn't do things like that. . .

At that moment Emily came into the room with a worn leather bag in her hand.

"It's Miss Pearson's," she said. "She left it down in the library."

Euphemia's face lit up.

"Oh . . . well, I'll run over to Highgate with it, Emily," she said. "There might be some things in it she needs."

Her face was mischievously triumphant like the face of a child that has suddenly and unexpectedly got its own way.

It was a pretty little house with short net curtains and behind them long curtains of gay cretonne. It had a white front-door step and a green front door with a shining brass handle. There were flowers at all the windows. It looked a neat, clean, self-respecting little house.

Miss Pearson opened the door. She had changed from the saxe-blue dress to a faded jumper suit and a flowered apron. Her eyes lit up with ingenuous pleasure at the sight of Euphemia.

"Oh, how *kind* of you . . . and how careless of me to leave it behind! It didn't matter . . . you shouldn't have bothered to bring it. I'd got my purse in my pocket so it was all right. . . *Do* come in."

A clean, pleasant little hall. A clean, pleasant little sitting-room with a bright coal fire burning in the grate. A pretty, smiling woman, short and plump, with dark wavy hair and full red lips. Not thin and overworked. No trace of tears now. Miss Pearson introduced them.

"This is Miss Tracy whom I've told you so much about, Edie. She's very kindly brought my bag that I left behind. . . My sister, Mrs. Lawley."

The plump little woman smiled, showing white, regular teeth.

"I'm so glad to see you. You'll stay to tea, won't you?"

And she began to talk to Euphemia with vivacious affability, displaying a flattering interest in all her concerns.

Miss Pearson watched them with eager pleasure, delighted that Miss Tracy should meet her beloved Edie (and at her very sweetest, too—that was lucky), and that Edie should meet her dear Miss Tracy. (Edie, not knowing any of the people at Hampstead, was apt to be a little short when she began to talk about them. It would be different

now.) She took no part in the conversation unless directly addressed. She merely watched and listened and tried to keep the children from interrupting—helping one to build bricks, telling another a story in undertones, coaxing another out of a fit of ill-temper, setting another to “help Auntie” with the tea.

“No, don’t bother Mummy, darling. Don’t you see—she’s talking to the lady. I’ll do it for you, Micky. . . Look, come with Auntie. . .”

Tense, eager, radiantly happy, she was spreading a cloth over the table, carrying in the tea things, keeping the children quiet and occupied, quelling incipient disputes, and listening to the conversation all at the same time. Her sister was obviously pleased with herself and the impression she was making. And she *is* charming, thought Euphemia. The interest she showed in you and all your affairs might not be real, but it was disarming and rather exciting. They drew the chairs up to the table. Miss Pearson presided, pouring out the tea, tying on the children’s feeders, spreading their bread and jam, smilingly checking their exuberance so that “Mummy and the lady” could talk. . .

Euphemia gathered from the conversation that Aunt Hetty made the children’s clothes, that Aunt Hetty did the spring cleaning and distempered the rooms every April, that Aunt Hetty did the bulk of the daily housework after putting the children to bed in the evening. And you couldn’t be sorry for her, because she was so happy with it all, so proud of the children, the little house, and her sister. If you took her away from it and gave her a good time, with money to spend on herself and people to wait on her, thought Euphemia, she’d be wretched. But still—she oughtn’t to look quite so tired. . .

In the sudden silence a church clock struck six.

“Surely that’s not right,” said Euphemia.

Miss Pearson smiled. “No, it’s wrong. When I was ironing the children’s things last night, it struck one o’clock and gave me a dreadful fright. It was only twelve really.”

"She's lucky to be able to have both home life and a business career, isn't she?" said her sister. "Very few girls get the chance of combining the two. And, of course, we simply *love* having her here."

"Yes, but I don't think that she ought to be ironing till after midnight," said Euphemia.

If she had thought for a moment, of course, she would not have said it. Hetty, hotly embarrassed, protested that she loved ironing and that she hated going to bed before midnight.

The sister spoke in a voice that was suddenly high-pitched and haughty and affected.

"My sister need not do anything she does not wish to, Miss Tracy. I do my full share of the housework."

It was as if Euphemia's words had been the wicked fairy's wand transforming the whole scene. Mrs. Lawley's face changed as though a curtain had been lowered on a stage, then raised to display a different "set." The smiling pleasantness vanished, and a look of tense ill-humour settled upon it. She relinquished now all attempt to charm. Like a painter whose picture has been spoilt, she flung aside her brushes and refused to add another stroke. She began to snap irritably at the children. They answered her with a pertness that was an unconscious imitation of her own manner. There was a miniature scene, and she sent one of them to bed. She seemed to be as determined now to make the party a failure as a minute ago she had been to make it a success. Hetty was trying to smooth over the situation, interposing with strained, anxious tactfulness between her sister and the children, aware that things had gone wrong, making frantic efforts to set them right, smiling her bright, worn, weary smile, talking to Euphemia and the unresponsive Edie at the same time. After tea Edie, despite her sister's protests, busied herself determinedly with the clearing away and washing up, ignoring Euphemia, snapping viciously at the children whenever they got in her way. It was as if she said, "All right, if you won't appreciate me at my best, you shall have me at my worst and see how you like that." Her ill-humour seemed

to fill the little house like a black cloud. When Euphemia went away she accompanied her to the door, wiping her steaming hands on her apron.

"You must excuse my not having seen as much of you as I should have liked to have done," she said distantly, "but there's a lot of work with a family of our size."

Walking down the road to the 'bus, Euphemia thought: That's how she's going to punish her, of course, for my having said that. She's going to insist on doing all the work this evening, and Hetty will be miserable. They'll both be miserable. I was a fool to say it. . . She *loves* slaving for them, and if she's happy—still, I hate to see her looking so tired all the time. And what's to happen to her when she grows old?

Miss Pearson was full of eager explanations over the next morning's eleven o'clock cup of tea.

"Of course, you could see what she was like . . . very highly strung and super-sensitive. And she's so humble and modest that she can simply never believe that my friends like her. You have to know her very well before you can really understand her. I think all the finest characters are like that, don't you?"

She means that you've got to lay it on thick, thought Euphemia. You've got to be making a fuss of her all the time or she starts sulking. She's different in the way she shows it but she's rather like Mr. Host. Yes, she *is* rather like Mr. Host. . .

An idea came into Euphemia's mind that took away her breath by its very outrageousness. She dismissed it at once, but it crept back again, refusing to be finally dislodged.

XVIII

EUPHEMIA sat in her little room at work upon the household mending. Her hair lay in its sleek waves, fastened carefully and conscientiously into the low knot in the nape of her neck. She wore the plain brown dress with white collar and cuffs that Miss Cliffe had helped her to buy after she had secured the post. She looked her part to perfection. But she did not feel it. Raising her head from her work, she threw a glance that was almost a wink at the geranium in the window. She felt somehow that the geranium was the only being in the world who knew her as she really was. It had heard father's ferocious bellow summoning her upstairs, it had seen George pursuing her down the Felton road, it had known her in her home-made dresses of frills and flounces and fichus. She laid the sock on her knee and sat gazing dreamily into space, seeing herself again seated on the edge of the pavement behind a basket of flowers—banks of daffodils and tulips and lilies of the valley and violets—watching the people pass to and fro. She'd do her hair the old way and wear a large hat with feathers or artificial flowers. Or she'd have a fruit stall. . . She saw herself sitting in her gay hat behind mountains of oranges and apples and grapes and bananas, feasting her eyes on the crowds, feeling the human contacts that were meat and drink to her. . . Her customers would call her "Ma," and she would call them "dearie." They would make little confidences over their purchases. ("They're for my daughter, she's in hospital," or "They're for my little boy's birthday party, he's just ten.") It would be Life. She had thought that this would

be Life, but—sitting alone in a room darning socks and pillow-cases wasn't Life. She hadn't run away from George for this. She could have been sitting alone in a room darning socks in George's cottage if that was all she wanted. It occurred to her suddenly with a thrill of relief that she could give in her notice to Mr. Host today. There would be Miss Cliffe to deal with, of course—Miss Cliffe, to whom Euphemia was aware that she owed gratitude and a certain duty. Still—well, if she was afraid of Miss Cliffe (and she wasn't), she could just go. Just run away.

The thought attracted her. It was exciting and romantic. She would go one evening, take with her a suitcase and the geranium, and in the morning they would find her bed unslept in and a note on her dressing-table telling them that she had gone.

It was while she was thinking of this that there came a knock at her door, and Imogen entered.

She had not seen Imogen, except in the distance, since the Sunday evening when Denis had brought her home. As usual, she reminded Euphemia of something fine worn very near the breaking-point. Even as she stood immobile just inside the door she gave the impression of nervous restlessness. She smiled jerkily as her glance met Euphemia's.

"I can't find a soul anywhere," she said. "May I come here?"

"Yes, do," said Euphemia.

Imogen drew a footstool on to the hearth and sat down on it opposite Euphemia, her chin resting on her knees, her arms clasped about her slender legs. With her mop of chestnut curls and her thin, keen, nervous face, she reminded Euphemia of a friendly faun.

"I'm at a hatefully loose end," she confided. "I was going to a party at Janet's, and they've rung up to say that she's got scarlet fever. It's too late to arrange anything else, so I'm stranded till this evening. This evening's all right. I'm going out to a dance with Denis. I thought that would be off, too, because we quarrelled yesterday, but we made it up last night."

"Don't you get tired with going about so much?" said Euphemia, drawing the wool slowly out of her darn.

"No, I'm all right as long as I'm going about. It's when I've suddenly nothing to do and nowhere to go like this that I feel so rotten. Just at present I've got a raging headache, and I could weep buckets if anyone said a kind word to me. But if someone rang me up and asked me to come out to something, I'd be all right in a second. You see—if you're *doing* something all the time, you've no time to think how futile everything is, and it's having time to think how futile everything is that makes you feel so rotten. You don't mind my talking, do you? It's a nervous affection that comes over me sometimes. If I can't be doing something, I must be talking. It's the next best thing."

"No . . . talk as much as you like," said Euphemia.

"I'm sorry to inflict myself on you, but you happen to be the only person available. The house is completely empty to all intents and purposes but for you."

"Isn't your father in the library?"

The thin red mouth twisted into a smile.

"Oh yes, I suppose so. Deep in the throes of creation, as he'd put it. Getting some more immortal literature ready for that pop-eyed little Pearson horror to type tomorrow morning. . . I'd go round to Brian's, but I was there last night and they were having one of their eternal rows. Why he should object to her going home to her mother while he's at the office, Heaven alone knows. She's not stayed a night there since the last row. She doesn't go till after breakfast, and she comes back to dinner, so that, even if he's home before her, he's only a minute or so to wait. And he raises Cain because she doesn't sit in the flat twiddling her thumbs while he's away. Men are the devil for unreasonableness. Why on earth *shouldn't* she spend the day with her mother? I wish to God I'd got one to spend it with." She put her curly head in her hands, and a look of pain flitted over her sharp, thin face. "Lord, I have got a head!"

"Why don't you go and lie down?" said Euphemia.

Imogen laughed.

"Lie down? Darling Tracy, I never spend a moment longer in this house than I need. It's a habit I got into in Aunt Dora's time. We hated each other like poison. But," she glanced around her, "you look awfully nice and peaceful here."

Euphemia thought: She sees it all as it looks. She doesn't know that a minute ago I was feeling more or less as she's feeling—sick of it all and longing to get out. . .

Imogen had leapt suddenly to her feet and was wandering about the room, taking things up and putting them down again without looking at them. Then she came back to the footstool, and, fixing her eyes on the flames, said:

"You remember that Sunday evening when Denis brought me home tight, don't you?"

"Yes."

"It—it was Peter Cornish standing in the library doorway watching, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

There was a long silence. The girl's face looked for a moment almost haggard in the firelight. Then she tossed back her curly head and laughed a jangling, inharmonious laugh.

"Well . . . that's that, isn't it?"

There was a knock at the door and Denis Callander entered. He nodded carelessly to Euphemia as he closed the door behind him.

"Here you are," he said to Imogen. "Run you to earth at last."

She looked up at him. "I thought you were going to work this afternoon."

"I was, but I didn't feel like it."

She laughed.

"You never do, do you? I can't think how you ever managed that one book. You should follow Daddy's example and sit turning out immortal stuff every afternoon, and find a little creature with pop eyes and dreadful clothes to dictate it to next morning."

He snorted contemptuously, and she added, "It's a jolly sight better than your way of never doing any work at all, anyway."

He sat down by the fire and stretched out his legs to the blaze.

"My dear child, poetry is a very different thing from circulating library tripe."

"It may be," she said, "but the question people are beginning to ask themselves is—*was* that book of yours poetry, after all? Even Daddy's beginning to wonder if he's throwing away his only daughter on someone who's not going to reflect credit on him after all. They're waiting for your next book to damn you or otherwise."

He scowled at her.

"I didn't come here to discuss my work with you."

"What did you come to discuss?"

"I want to get this question of our marriage straight. It's settled for next spring, isn't it?"

"I suppose so."

"I wish to hell you wouldn't be so damned vague," he snapped irritably. "I've got definite arrangements to make if you haven't."

"If I haven't!" she laughed shortly. "You know, of course, that father wants to make a literary event of it. He'll send invitations to the whole of the literary Who's Who, and in his next book there'll be an affecting chapter in which a charming father marries a charming daughter to a charming bridegroom. The charming bridegroom will be a young poet on whom the eyes of the whole artistic world are fixed expectantly."

He looked at her with viciously narrowed eyes.

"I suppose you think you're funny. Because if you do, I'm sorry to be unappreciative."

"Please don't apologise. I quite understand. Father's just the same. Any reference to his work that is not entirely reverent infuriates him. . .

"What do you want to know about the wedding arrangements?" she went on. "Do you want a description for the press? I'm afraid I haven't decided what I'm going to wear,

so I can't let you know till nearer the time. . . But the bridesmaids are going to be Joan Tickett and——"

He interrupted with a deliberately offensive laugh.

"Joan Tickett as a bride's *maid*! By Jove, that's good!"

Imogen's pale face had flushed suddenly.

"What exactly do you mean by that?"

He was obviously delighted to have annoyed her.

Jone is a wench that's painted,
he quoted mockingly.

Jone is a girl that's tainted,
Yet Jone she goes
As one of those
Whom purity has sainted.

Her eyes flashed.

"Don't make your beastly rhymes about——"

"Herrick's, my dear," he interrupted, his good humour completely restored. "Herrick wrote it more than three hundred years ago. And there's no need to get annoyed by it either. Who cares whether Joan is tainted or not as long as she is charming?"

He spoke slowly and meaningly and with a smile of anticipatory triumph, as if he were introducing an old subject of contention and one that was certain to arouse her.

"Are we going to start that all over again?" she said, her thin breast rising and falling unevenly.

He shrugged.

"You started it, my dear, not I. . . . Why should you mind because I suspect a girl who means nothing to either of us of being—well, charming?"

She sprang to her feet.

"You know it's not that," she burst out hysterically, "it's—what you said about it, what you're always saying. As if it didn't matter whether one was decent or not. Why are you marrying me if you feel like that?"

"Because I happen to want you, and marriage is the only way of getting you. Because you're hidebound by

Victorian prejudices, and I'm willing to pander to them. If I wanted a Hottentot, I'd be quite willing to dance round her totem-pole or whatever the ceremony should happen to be. After all, there's nothing irrevocable about marriage, nowadays. It's a meaningless but picturesque ceremony like the Morris dance and crowning the May Queen. Quite amusing, too. . . Personally, however, I believe in freedom in all its implications. But I'm afraid we're boring Miss Tracy."

He was delighted with himself for having got under her guard.

"What do you mean by 'all its implications'?" she asked breathlessly.

He shrugged amusedly.

"Simple enough, isn't it?" he said.

"By freedom I suppose you mean faithlessness?"

"Why be so painfully Victorian, my dear?"

Her cheeks were scarlet, her eyes blazing.

"It's you who're being Victorian. That's just the Victorian idea—the husband can have as many mistresses as he wants, but the wife must never look at another man."

He smiled at her.

"Not at all," he said. "So long as you're charming to me, why should I mind whom else you're charming to?"

He came across to her and put his hands on her shoulders, but she twisted away from him, and struck him savagely in the face. He stepped back and stood glaring at her, his hand to his smarting cheek, his breath coming and going in quick gasps. Then he started towards her again, as if to take her in his arms. She resisted fiercely, and they wrestled together in the middle of the little room. Imogen was wiry for all her slenderness. . . Both faces were white with passion. Despite their anger there was something sensual in the struggle. At last he held her tightly pinioned, and, straining her to him, kissed her savagely again and again on the mouth. For a time she resisted, then relaxed suddenly in his arms and clung to him, returning his kisses passionately. Her whole body was trembling when he released her.

"What on earth were we quarrelling about?" he said. "What fools we are!"

"You didn't mean what you said, Denis, did you?"

"Not a word, my dear. I never do. . . Let's go out somewhere. There's a *thé dansant* at the Blue Chimneys."

"All right. Wait for me downstairs. I shan't be long."

She stood for a few moments after he had gone, staring unseeingly in front of her, then dropped suddenly on to the floor by Euphemia's chair, sobbing convulsively. Euphemia gathered her into her arms.

"What is it, dearie? There, there! Don't marry him if you don't love him."

"I do love him," sobbed Imogen, "but I'm so tired of everything. It's all so futile. I'm sick of everything you can do anywhere. I'm sick of being in love with Denis and quarrelling and making it up. . . And there's nothing else. I wish I could die. . . Life's so wretched and beastly and boring. . ."

"Couldn't your father help?" suggested Euphemia.

Imogen stopped crying and withdrew from Euphemia's arm, sitting on the hearthrug and looking up at her.

"Oh, surely you know father by this time," she said with her jangling little laugh. "He's always so kind and sweet-tempered, but—when you need him he's not *there*, somehow. You see . . . with father things must be going all right. Otherwise he's no use for you. If they aren't, you must pretend that they are. . . He doesn't want to be bothered with troubles and worries. . . It's as if he were just a front, all hollow behind. I adored him when I was a little girl. I'm still fond of him, but I've learnt that he's—no use."

"But, dearie," said Euphemia slowly, "there *are* other things in life than the things you do with it."

"Not for me, Tracy. You see . . . you're the sort of person you are, and it makes a kind of prison. You can't get away from it. . . And, if you're that sort of person," her form stiffened, and the pupils of her eyes seemed to dilate slightly, "then, even if the door opens, you shut it yourself. . ." She leapt suddenly to her feet. "Why do you

let me get so morbid, Tracy? What drivel I talk, don't I? I must go or Denis will be furious. He hates waiting. . . . Good-bye," she leant forward and kissed Euphemia lightly on the cheek, "and thank you for being so sympathetic with my neurotic outpourings."

She went to the door and waved gaily to Euphemia before she vanished.

Euphemia took up her interrupted sock. She heard the sound of Imogen running downstairs to Denis, then the closing of the front door as they set off for the Blue Chimneys.

After a few moments Maggie staggered in with a bucket of coals to replenish the coal box.

"You should 'ave seed 'im last night, Miss," she said, referring of course to Helbert. "Puttin' on my 'at, 'e was, an' walkin' round in it as comic as comic. 'E did like that injerrubber cat you sent 'im, too. Laughed all over 'is little fyce, 'e did, soon as 'e set eyes on it."

Emily came close on her heels. Emily had been to the pictures last night and today was doing her hair a different way and speaking with a husky American accent.

"There's a gentleman downstairs asking for Miss Imogen, Miss."

"She's just gone out," said Euphemia. "Who is it?"

"It's Mr. Cornish."

Euphemia hesitated a moment, then said:

"I'll go down to him."

He was sitting, large and solid, on the edge of a chair in the little-used drawing-room. There was about him a compelling air of honesty and kindness and dependability. Their eyes met, and at once understanding sprang to life between them. Euphemia thought: I feel as if I'd known him for years. Into her mind, too, flashed the memory of the last time she had seen him—when she was helping Imogen's unsteady form up the staircase.

"Miss Host's gone with Mr. Callander to the Blue Chimneys to a *thé dansant*," she said, and, after a silence in which he seemed to ask for her advice, continued, "Why don't you go there and find them?"

"Wouldn't that annoy her?" he said.

She remembered Imogen's words, "Even if the door opens, you shut it yourself."

"I don't think it would annoy her," she said, and added, surprising herself as well as him, "She isn't happy, you know."

He shook her hand suddenly in a clasp that made her wince, then took his hat and strode out of the house.

Euphemia went slowly back through the hall to the staircase. Passing the closed library door she saw, as plainly as if it were open, the figure of the author seated at his desk, weaving with conscientious care the stereotyped pattern of his romances. She tried to harden her heart against him, but she couldn't. He worked so industriously, so unremittingly. He had such an overwhelming sense of responsibility to his "public." He sacrificed so much of his own convenience to his "art," keeping undeviatingly to his hours of work, setting himself a rigid and uncongenial course of reading, which he followed with pencil in hand even in his hours of relaxation, marking phrases, words, turns of expression. . . And, most disarming of all, she saw the secret fear that lurked always behind his smile, fear of failure, of penury, of death, a tormenting distrust of his own talent, a haunting suspicion of the worthlessness of his work, a fear of Reality that no amount of flattery and reassurance could quite kill. . . He had thrown away the substance for the shadow. Even had he been the genius he hoped he was and feared he was not, it would have been more worth his while to be able to help his daughter now than to have written the greatest masterpiece the world has ever known. But—he had chosen the shadow, and for the shadow he toiled, exhausting and tormenting himself incessantly.

By his desk was the little table where in the morning Miss Pearson sat, reverently typing the words that she regarded as immortal, her pale, protruding eyes fixed on her work, lines of weariness showing on her sallow face. ("Cyril's got such a cough. He coughs all night, poor little chap. I've got him in my room so that he shan't disturb Edie. Her nerves are rather bad just now.")

Euphemia went upstairs to her room and took up the half-mended sock again. As she did so, she remembered with surprise that an hour ago she had decided to leave these people.

She had thought of them as tiny threads of human contact to be broken at will.

She found that they were iron chains that bound her, chains from which she could not escape.

XIX

EUPHEMIA stood in her bedroom, surveying her reflection in the mirror.

She wore a black evening-dress with decorously high neck and long sleeves. . . She was aware that she ought to feel excited, but she was conscious only of a heavy depression. She had felt excited enough when Dr. Marriott rang her up and asked her to come to dinner and to a theatre with him. But, as the day approached, the elation had faded away, leaving apprehension and shrinking. She knew that the evening would make demands on her to which she would be unable to respond. It would mean—for him, as for her—an agonising stretch of embarrassment. She braced herself to go through with it. His asking her at all meant, of course, that he imagined her to be someone interesting, someone who could talk to him, to whom he could talk. The sooner he found out that she was not, the better. . .

She tried to throw off her depression by concentrating her thoughts upon the "treat." It would be the first play she had ever seen. The postponed expedition with Miss Pearson had never taken place. It had actually been fixed for a day in the next week, but Miss Pearson's sister had rung up again at the last minute, and the familiar look of tender concern had flashed into the ingenuous sallow face bent so solicitously over the receiver.

"I don't know *what* you'll think of me, Miss Tracy. She wants me to go with you. She rang up just to wish me a happy afternoon, and she says I'm not to give it up on any account, but she's got a bad headache and feels depressed,

and—well, I know it would make all the difference if I went home. In fact, I'd be wretched all the time if I didn't. . . . You *do* understand, don't you, Miss Tracy?"

Euphemia had not gone to the theatre alone. She had become an incorrigible sightseer. Having learnt her London, she was now engaged in visiting its places of interest—The Tower, Hampton Court, Windsor Castle, the British Museum, the National Gallery, the South Kensington Museum, the Wallace Collection. She spent her salary on guide-books and textbooks of English history. She devoured them eagerly in her little sitting-room during her free time. She was drunk with the thrill of history. She withstood the Danes in Wessex and the Normans at Senlac, she followed Richard to the Crusade, she stood with the barons against John, she fought at Crécy, Agincourt, and Wakefield, she was imprisoned with Sir Thomas Moore, she swept the seas with Drake for Spanish gold, she followed young Charles into exile, she rioted with the rakes at the Reformation, she laughed at the Georges, she adored the girl queen receiving Lord Melbourne in her nightdress. . .

She discovered the National Portrait Gallery and spent in it hours that flew by like minutes. She lay awake at night wrestling with insolvable problems, trying to adjust conflicting loyalties, for as well as serving Elizabeth she plotted for Mary's freedom, and as well as fighting for Charles she withstood his assaults upon her country's rights.

It was as if endless new continents had opened out before her, as if she herself had suddenly become innumerable people instead of one.

She tucked away a strand of hair that had escaped from the sleek mass and gazed at her reflection with growing distaste. Why did people like hair like that? She liked wavy hair, but she liked a wave to be a real wave—springy, frizzy—not this ordered smoothness.

As she opened the wardrobe to get out her cloak, she heard the sound of a taxi drawing up at the front door. That would be for Mr. Host. Mr. Host was going out with Elissa Durrant, and Imogen was going out with Peter

Cornish. Elissa Durrant had been to the last two Sunday gatherings, and had been an almost daily visitor during the week. The author's gratification was more than ever mingled with dismay. She broke unceremoniously into his working hours. She dragged him off to obscure meetings in obscure parts of London. She had, in fact, taken complete possession of him. With his unhappy flattered smile, he made Euphemia think of a rabbit in the course of being hypnotised by a snake.

Miss Pearson was deeply perturbed by the situation. "I've known from the very beginning that she wanted to marry him, Miss Tracy, and—oh, she isn't good enough for him."

"Well, he needn't marry her if he doesn't want to," said Euphemia.

"That's what I'm afraid of," said Miss Pearson, lowering her voice to a confidential and slightly sinister whisper. "I know him better than anyone, I think, though I'm not fit to black his boots for him." (Euphemia repressed a desire to remark that the author generally wore brown shoes—"I'm not fit to brown his shoes." . . . No, it would mean the same, of course, but somehow it wouldn't sound right.) "He has the most beautiful nature that any man ever had. He simply doesn't know how to say 'No.' He lets all these photographers and interviewers molest him simply because he's too good-natured to refuse. And he's too chivalrous to hurt a woman, Miss Tracy. She's *shameless*." Quite a venomous look had come into Miss Pearson's usually amiable face. "She's as likely as not to ask him straight out to marry her, and he won't be able to refuse. He's the soul of chivalry."

"But why on earth should she want to marry him?" Euphemia had said.

"Oh, I know that sort of woman," said Miss Pearson, assuming a rather unconvincing air of worldly wisdom. "She's clever and all that, but she likes a good time, and she doesn't earn enough to get it. So she wants to marry someone who does. . . . And she enjoys being looked up to. He's so humble and generous-minded, you know, that he thinks that his work is nothing in comparison with hers."

Euphemia had laughed away Miss Pearson's fears, but she was beginning to suspect that they might, after all, be justified. Looking out of the window now she saw Miss Durrant being handed into a taxi by Adrian Host. Yes . . . there was something vaguely possessive in her bearing. He wore his cloak and carried his silver-topped stick with less of an air than usual. He looked slightly, very slightly, disconsolate.

"If that comes off, I'll have to look out for another job," said Euphemia with rising spirits. "I'll toss up whether I'll have a flower stall or a fruit stall."

Her bedroom door opened and Imogen peeped in, looking very lovely and childish in a dress of shimmering silver. "I'm off in a sec, Tracy," she said. "Aren't we all gay to-night? . . . I've just come in to warn you. If Denis rings up before you go, I've gone to bed with a headache. I've got out of going with him by telling him that. Now don't say: 'Why not tell him the truth?' You don't know Denis. He talks as if he didn't mind how many traces I kick over, but he sees red if another man speaks to me. It wouldn't matter so much if it were anyone else than Peter, but Denis was wild when he came to the Blue Chimneys after us. He made a most ghastly scene in public. He's got a nasty suspicious mind, you know. Well, I don't see why I shouldn't have any men friends, just because I'm engaged to him, do you? I'm not married to him yet, after all." Then came the sound of the front-door bell. "There's Peter. Good-bye, darling. Have a nice time with your old man. Daddy's just gone off with Brains. I shall hate her as a stepmother, but I shall be married myself then, and I shall have my hands full with Denis."

When she had gone, Euphemia held up the black velvet evening cloak and surveyed it dispassionately. "Black," she said, "I can't make out why people are so mad on black. It's not a colour at all." She thought of reds and purples and royal blues. "I'll break out one of these days," she predicted. "I'll get to a pitch soon when I'll have to cheer myself up by wearing a colour that is a colour, or die."

Through the open window she heard the sound of

another taxi drawing up, and then the sound of the front-door knocker. Her heart sank.

"Never mind," she exhorted herself, "it'll soon be over. You must just keep telling yourself that every second brings it nearer the end. And it's best to get it over. Probably he thinks you're a lady. He must, or he wouldn't have asked you. It'll be best for both of you for him to find out that you're not."

He was waiting for her in the drawing-room, and they went at once to the waiting taxi. A strange cold paralysis seemed to have settled upon Euphemia's spirit. She sat stiffly, staring in front of her, speaking only in monosyllables. She felt suddenly as if she were doing something deliberately dishonest in coming out with him. She had not realised how outrageous it all was, till she found herself driving through the street by his side like this. He asked her where she had been last week on her free afternoon. She told him that she had been to St Bartholomew's, Smithfield, and after that the conversation died away. She could not talk to him. She could do nothing but say to herself over and over again, "You've no business here. . . You ought to have said you couldn't come."

It was a "swell" restaurant—page boys and commissionaires and a magnificent foyer with deep arm-chairs. Euphemia drew herself up to her full height and stared defiantly at the commissionaire as she passed him. The cloak-room was like a room in a palace—cream walls, a deep mauve carpet, silver fittings. A thin elderly woman with a scar across one cheek was in charge of it. She was speaking to a tall Juno who was tidying her hair and who had disdainfully let fall a comment on the weather.

"Yes, 'm, it's been a lovely day, but the weather don't seem to make no difference to me. I got such chilblains on me feet."

Juno was evidently not interested in the attendant's chilblains. She dropped sixpence into the saucer without replying and departed. Euphemia, however, was interested. Her depression dropped from her suddenly at this call of humanity.

"Chilblains?" she said. "What do you do for them?"

"I've tried heverythink, mum," said the attendant, "an' nothink's no good. They're things you don't get much sympathy for, but my! they can give you jip."

She had not, however, tried Euphemia's remedy. She had not tried putting peppercorns between her toes in cold weather.

"You soon get used to the feel of them," said Euphemia earnestly. "They keep out the cold, and it's cold that brings chilblains. I've never tried them myself because I'm not subject to chilblains, but my mother knew someone that was and peppercorns cured her."

"I've 'ad 'em ever since I can remember," said the attendant gloomily. "Not that I often 'ad time to think of 'em in the old days." She grew confidential, as if sensing the glowing sympathy and interest that lay behind Euphemia's heavy smile. "When you're knocked about reg'lar every other night or so by your old man, chilblains don't worry you."

"Did he drink?" said Euphemia.

"Chronic," said the woman. "Couldn't keep a job for more'n two days. I 'ad to go out to work, 'owever near my time I was, or there wouldn't have been a crumb in the 'ouse."

"How many children had you?"

"Ten, six livin'. One married in Canada, one in Australia, another in Scotland, and the others all scattered, as you might say. I've got seven grandchildren, though I've only seen two of 'em. We've none of us got money to spend on railway fares. . . Mind you, my ole man, 'e never touched the children. 'E wasn't a good father, all things considered, but 'e never knocked the children about. 'E didn't take no interest in 'em. 'E was fond of me in 'is own way, an' I've missed 'im cruel since 'e was took."

"How long ago did he die?" asked Euphemia.

"Four years. Walked straight in a motor car. No one's fault but 'is own, it wasn't. Blind drunk 'e was, singin' an' dancin' in the middle of the road. . . I've been lucky enough since it 'appened. Used to do charin' for a gentle-

man that's one of the directors 'ere, an' 'e got me this job when the doctor said I was past charin'." She sighed deeply. "Still—lucky or not—I miss the good ole days, as they say. I kind of feel that there's not much left in life when you've got time to worry about chilblains." She glanced into the looking-glass at the reflection of the scar that disfigured her cheek. "Threw a knife at me, 'e did, celebratin' the Harmistice. Didn't know 'e'd 'it me till two days after." She stroked it almost lovingly with her rough unshapely fingers. "I'm kind of glad I've got it to remind me of 'im."

A woman, wearing a cloak trimmed with ostrich feathers, trailed into the room, and Euphemia, who had forgotten that her escort would be waiting for her upstairs, hastily gathered up her bag and hurried up the shallow carpeted stairs. Her conversation with the attendant had brought back the warmth to her heart, had given her again that radiant consciousness of common humanity that was so necessary to her, but, at the sight of the foyer, with its air of quiet opulence, and the correctly attired figure of Dr. Marriott waiting for her, it departed abruptly, and again the cold paralysis crept over her, freezing her every faculty at its source.

The dining-room fulfilled the promise of the foyer. Everything was quietly opulent and in perfect taste. Correct people, dressed correctly, sat round little tables, eating correct food. They talked in low voices. Their faces were expressionless. There was hardly any sound but the sound of muted music that came with a kind of hushed decorum from the further end of the room. Euphemia's spirits sank still further.

On Saturday afternoon she would sometimes go to a Lyons restaurant for tea. She loved the glare and the noise, the clatter and bustle, the loud bursts of laughter, the deafening "music," the whole sensation of warm, jostling humanity. . . . She would sit and watch the people around her with a passionate interest that never lost a fraction of its eagerness—the family parties, the married couples, the lovers. Motherly benediction would shine from her eyes as she

followed the stages of a "picking up" . . . the exchange of glances, the veiled invitation, the final *rapprochement*. When she saw hands touch furtively beneath the table her ears heard already the sound of wedding bells. Occasionally something sharp and anguished wove itself into the pattern—a couple quarrelling in vicious undertones, a woman sobbing beneath her breath. . . Last Saturday a girl, sitting by an open window, had suddenly begun to throw everything on the table out into the street. The room had been cleared and an ambulance sent for. . . . It was Life—pulsating, triumphant, agonising. She glanced around at the discrete refinement of this room and its occupants. Nothing like that could ever happen here. No one could quarrel or weep or go mad here. . . Her companion was making determined efforts to talk to her, but she felt as one feels in a nightmare—unable to move or speak.

"You come from Sussex, don't you?"

"Yes."

There was a long silence, then he said, "Have you made toffee since that day we all made it at Hampstead?"

"No."

Her thoughts went back to the attendant with the scar across her cheek. . . Somehow she seemed to Euphemia to be the only live person in a building full of corpses. Even the waiters were corpses. They slid to and fro as if on noiseless castors, their faces vacant and meaningless. From behind Euphemia a man was talking in a slow drawl. "The mistake the government's made all along is treatin' these fellahs as if they were human bein's. . . Well, I've lived in Africa and India, and I think I can claim to know somethin' about the native, and it's *fatal* to treat him as a human bein'. . . ."

From a table alongside came a woman's voice. "Oh, my dear, you *must* bring your Toto to my Pekie's At Home day next week. There'll be nothing that will do him any harm. Just a little breast of chicken. . . Moyna brings her Chin-Chin, you know, and Brenda her Popsie. It's *great* fun to watch them together. . . ."

The dreadful meal was over at last. A taxi again . . . then the theatre. . . . Two stalls in the third row. On all sides of them sat people just like the people of the restaurant. Euphemia looked round the house, glancing rather wistfully at the gallery. The play began. . . . It was a modern social comedy that conveyed nothing to Euphemia. Smart people sat about a smart room uttering smart epigrams. Most of the epigrams touched on sex and made Euphemia hotly uncomfortable. Sex itself shocked her not at all. The sight of lurking couples in a dark country lane thrilled her. They were to her part of the pattern of Life. The outspokenness of Chaucer and Shakespeare and Malory seemed to her to be right and natural. But these veiled innuendoes and the sniggers that greeted them made her feel as hotly embarrassed as a schoolgirl. In the interval her companion still tried unsuccessfully to entertain her.

"It's clever, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Do you go to the pictures much?"

"No."

He relinquished the effort in despair. He felt more disappointed by the evening than he would have cared to admit. It had been, of course, a complete failure, but it was not only that that depressed him. It was the absence of something in his companion that he had thought was there. On his two previous meetings with her, at the Belgravia Ladies' Residential Club and at Adrian Host's, he had seemed to feel in her some compelling quality of life, some vital force, inspiring, re-creating. He had been wrong. She was dull and stupid. Inexpressibly dull and stupid. He did not quite know what he had expected from the evening, but he had looked forward to it eagerly, and its failure gave him a corresponding sense of disappointment. He had been overworking lately, and his neurasthenic women patients had begun slightly—very slightly—to get upon his nerves. As a sort of antidote to his irritation he had formed the habit of thinking of that impression of exuberant health and sanity that Euphemia had given him. The memory had acted on him like a charm, restoring his sense of humour

and proportion, giving him patience with his pack of nerve-ridden, self-centred women. And it was depressing to find her, after all, dull, stupid, and listless. She refused his suggestion, not very enthusiastically made, of supper after the play, and he took her home in a taxi. On the way his thoughts went back over the evening. . . He had tried to give her a "treat." He didn't know exactly what had gone wrong. The dinner had been unexceptional. The play had not been exactly what he had thought it would be, but it was clever and extremely well acted. Surely she ought to have appreciated that. . .

The taxi drew up at the door. He had a sudden vision of her making toffee in the kitchen, her hair falling untidily over her eyes, her cheeks flushed, her whole being radiating life in some queer inexplicable way. . . She *had* been like that. Something had gone wrong with tonight, but—she *had* been like that. On an impulse he said: "We must go out again some time, and you must choose what we'll do."

The next morning Imogen came into her room and sat down on the footstool, clasping her thin arms about her knees. "Daddy looks a bit worried this morning, Tracy. I'm afraid that he's beginning to realise that Brains has designs on him. You know 'In vain is the net spread in the sight of the bird' isn't a true proverb at all. The bird is flattered. It feels that it would be unchivalrous not to enter the net. People in its books, you see, always prefer a life of bondage to the slightest lack of chivalry to a lady. . . Did Denis ring up last night?"

"No."

"That's good. I had a heavenly time, Tracy. A heavenly dull time. I didn't have to try to be clever. I was made to feel Victorian—tended and guarded and shielded and all that. I wish I'd lived in Victorian times. They must have been quite jolly. . . Tracy, his farm's twenty miles from the nearest town. It sounds ghastly, doesn't it? When he orders provisions they're dumped on a spot in the road three miles away, and he has to fetch them from there. I simply can't think how people *exist* in places like that. . .

He says the climate's marvellous. . . Now, tell me all about your evening, Tracy."

Euphemia considered her evening in silence. Looking back, the only part of it that seemed real to her was the attendant with chilblains whose husband had knocked her about.

XX

THE note was delivered to Euphemia the next day. It was written in a loose sprawling hand, very unlike Miss Cliffe's usual neat writing.

DEAR MISS TRACY,

Will you come round here at once if you can? Something dreadful has happened.

M. CLIFFE.

Mr. Host gave his permission readily enough. He had just received a letter from the editor of a literary paper, asking him if their reporter might interview him that afternoon.

"Yes, certainly, Miss Tracy," he said. "Certainly. . . We none of us are allowed any peace, are we? Especially we unfortunate authors. Just when I particularly want a clear day's work, I'm forced to give up a precious afternoon to being interviewed—a thing I detest more than anything else." His eyes went to the letter he held in his hand. It was quite sufficiently flattering, and his thin sensitive lips curved into a smile, then he glanced at the enclosed list of authors, interviews with whom had already appeared in the journal, and the familiar lines of anxious despondency traced themselves around his mouth. . . . Too many authors of precarious claim to immortality had been interviewed before him.

"Of course," he went on, "my objection to interviews is well known, so that they're good enough to leave me in peace in the ordinary way, but sometimes they take courage to renew their attack and catch me in a weak moment."

His nervous smile flitted round the room. "Some more flowers, I think, Miss Tracy. . . ." He moved across to the shelves beneath the window, took out an encyclopaedia and laid it on the top of the shelves as if it had just been consulted. He opened a book of poetry at random and turned it face downward across the arm of an easy chair, as if he had been interrupted when reading it. He drew from its wrapping a literary journal that had lain unopened for some weeks in his letter basket and placed it in a prominent position on his desk. He collected a few lighter magazines from tables and book-shelves and put them away in a drawer. Then he seemed to realise suddenly that Euphemia was still there.

"Yes . . . more flowers, Miss Tracy . . . I think that's all. And—oh, you might have that photograph of Imogen and Brian as children brought down here from my bedroom. I've been thinking for some time that I'd like to have it on my desk. . . Miss Pearson will stay, of course. . . ."

He began to pace restlessly to and fro. There was a curious little smile on his lips, diffident but complacent, suggesting that already in imagination he was addressing his interviewer.

"Yes, I'll see to the flowers," said Euphemia, "and have the photograph brought down. Are you sure it's all right for me to go?"

"Quite, Miss Tracy," said the author with a courtly bow.

Euphemia filled four more vases with flowers, brought down the photograph of Imogen and Brian, then set off to the Belgravia Ladies' Residential Club.

Miss Cliffe herself opened the door. Her usual groomed trimness was missing. Her hair was put up anyhow. Her dress was untidy. Her large pale face was coated untidily with powder that clung heavily in the wrinkles. She looked ten years older.

"Oh, my dear," she said. "Do come in . . . I'm so glad you've come. As soon as it happened I thought of you. You didn't mind my sending for you, did you? I felt I'd go mad if I didn't have someone to talk to about it. . . I've got to keep up before the others, of course . . ."

She led Euphemia into her little room.

"Sit down," she said, and motioned to one of the shabby basket chairs, sinking herself into the other to the accompaniment of a fusillade of creaks. She sat huddled in it, looking like a stuffed figure that has lost its stuffing.

"What's happened?" said Euphemia.

"It's Miss Furmore," said Miss Cliffe; "she's committed suicide. . . ." She stared in front of her blankly for a few moments then burst out, "She's ruined me. . . *Suicide*. . . The one thing a place like this can't afford."

"Why did she do it?"

Miss Cliffe spread out her hands.

"She'd had a notice that Bolton's were going into liquidation. It's the only one of her investments that pays anything now. You know what investments have been the last few years. . . . She hadn't a bean but what she got from Bolton's. . . She's only just been able to live on it by cadging invitations from everyone she ever knew . . . Well, I suppose it left her penniless."

"When did she hear?"

"Yesterday's afternoon post. She didn't seem to turn a hair. She put on her best evening-dress for dinner, and stayed talking in the lounge for some time afterwards. She seemed just the same as usual. She was talking about the weather and Goodwood. Then she went straight upstairs, shut the window, and turned on the gas. . . She'd stuffed paper into the keyhole and round the door, and no one smelt it until this morning. . . She was lying on her bed in her evening-dress. She had that sneer on her face. . . ." Miss Cliffe broke off suddenly and began to cry.

Euphemia remembered the tall willowy figure, the tired contemptuous eyes, the bitter curve of the handsome lips.

"The *selfishness* of it!" sobbed Miss Cliffe. "Wouldn't you have thought she'd have spared me this? If I could have kept it out of the papers—but I can't. Everyone except the residents has gone. Well, naturally—why should they stay in a house where a thing like this has happened? It's ruined me. I hardly make a penny on the residents. The selfishness, the wicked *selfishness* of it!"

Pity for Miss Furmore, for Miss Cliffe, for all humanity, burnt like a flame at Euphemia's heart.

"I expect she didn't realise what she was doing," she said gently.

"She knew enough to know it would ruin me," said Miss Cliffe. "I've struggled for years, and this is the end."

"Nonsense!" said Euphemia briskly. "It will make no difference at all. This time next month everyone will have completely forgotten it. People know when they're well off. They couldn't get the food they get here anywhere else at the same price, and they know it."

The ghost of its old erectness returned to Miss Cliffe's sagging figure.

"I've always prided myself on giving them the best," she said, "and Heaven knows I've made little enough out of it, but people *don't* know when they're well off. That's where you're wrong. They want smart gimcrack furniture and men waiters and a lot of niggling highly flavoured courses made up from what was left over yesterday. They don't *want* to know what they're eating. They only want to be smart. So long as they can call it a five-course dinner, they don't care what rubbish they eat. . . People weren't like that when I started in the business. They wanted comfort. . . And my things are good. I don't mean only the food. That chiffonier in the drawing-room was a present from my grandfather to my mother when she married, and it cost fifty pounds. I know the place is shabby, of course, and the carpets are wearing. I'm always meaning to have it done up. . . ."

The shock had broken down Miss Cliffe's defence of dignity and made her weakly garrulous. ("That's right, talk," thought Euphemia, "it'll do you good.")

"Well, *you* know, Miss Tracy," went on Miss Cliffe. "You were only here two days, but *you* know that I never grudge trouble. I do my best for everyone. I'm on my feet all day. I do three people's work."

"I know you do," said Euphemia soothingly. In spirit she was rocking the sagging form of Miss Cliffe tenderly in her arms.

"And then for this to happen!" went on Miss Cliffe. "People don't forget a thing like this. They'll say 'Belgravia Ladies' Residential Club. . . Oh yes, that's where that woman committed suicide. . .' They'll say it for *years*. . . All my hard work for nothing. She might have done it to spite me. I've always been kind to her—let her bills run on anyhow; and she turns on me like this—*ruins* me."

There was a knock at the door, and Miss Greeves entered. She wore a woebegone expression and walked on tiptoe as if she were in church. Miss Cliffe's figure had automatically straightened itself at her entrance. Miss Greeves nodded in a conspiratorial fashion at Euphemia.

"Mrs. Lancaster wants to know if she can have her tea and dinner sent upstairs," she said. "She's absolutely *pros-trated* by this terrible affair."

"I really don't see why she should be," said Miss Cliffe tartly. "I don't see why anyone in the house need be affected by it except myself."

"Oh, Miss Cliffe!" said Miss Greeves reproachfully. "You know how highly strung Mrs. Lancaster is. She *feels* things so. . . Well, it's natural, isn't it, brought up as she was in the lap of luxury, cherished and guarded and everything done for her. Even after she was twenty-one she always had to take her maid with her when she went up to town to do shopping. Four outdoor servants and seven indoors." Miss Greeves's face glowed with a curious fanatic light as if she were a priestess expounding her cult. "Well, *naturally* she feels things more than we do. Her people had lived at Ritherden Manor for *hundreds* of years. . . . And, of course, Miss Furmore belonged to the same class. There was a bond between them."

"They couldn't bear the sight of each other," put in Miss Cliffe curtly.

"But there was a *bond* you couldn't understand," said Miss Greeves earnestly. "It's upset Mrs. Lancaster terribly. It's fortunate that it's my holiday, because I couldn't possibly have left her. She keeps up so splendidly that no one but me knows how she feels. . . ."

The shock had made Miss Greeves also garrulous. It was clear that she would go on talking about Mrs. Lancaster as long as anyone would listen to her. Miss Cliffe cut her short abruptly.

"Yes, Miss Greeves," she said, "it's quite all right. I'll send Mrs. Lancaster's tea and dinner up to her."

Miss Greeves gazed from Miss Cliffe to Euphemia with misty eyes. "It's wonderful, isn't it," she said vaguely, "how trouble *draws* us together."

Irritation seemed to have given Miss Cliffe fresh courage. She sat almost erect in her chair as Miss Greeves tiptoed out.

"Of course, she'll take advantage of it," she said when the door closed. "Any excuse to make a nuisance of herself. . . . She's never forgiven me for sending you to Mr. Host's. Oh, she'll make the most of this. She'll send for me tonight, and she'll say that she's afraid she really can't stay any longer after this, and we'll both know that she'll end by staying, and I'll wish I had the courage to take her at her word and let her go, but I won't have, because it *does* make a difference having her and she knows it does. . . . Oh, well," she rose, almost her old brisk self. "I suppose that things will just go on. . . . What is it, Gladys?"

The maid who had entered was pale, with red-rimmed eyes. "Please, 'm, it's the police again," she said, her face working.

"Pull yourself together, Gladys," said Miss Cliffe sharply, "and don't be a fool."

The maid burst into tears. "I can't stand it, 'm, I can't. The police coming, an' 'er upstairs. It gives me the creeps. I'm not used to it. I can't stand a night 'ere. Not with 'er. . . . I'm fair scared, I tell you. I'm goin'."

"You forfeit a week's wages, then," snapped Miss Cliffe.

"All right, I forfeits 'em," said the girl, drying her eyes and speaking in a tone of whining defiance. "I forfeits 'em an' glad to go. There's bad luck on the place. Everyone says so."

Miss Cliffe was trembling with anger.

"I wouldn't keep a snivelling coward like you even if you were any good. . . . Go and pack your bag now."

The girl hesitated, then began to whine again. "That was you givin' me notice, so I've a right to me week's money now."

"I'll pay you your week's money willingly to be rid of you," said Miss Cliffe. "Go and pack your bag."

The girl began to sob again. "I can't. I can't go past that room, I tell you—not with 'er in it. . . ."

"Get out!" said Miss Cliffe savagely, pushing the weeping girl into the hall.

The opening of the door revealed the figure of the policeman, standing solid and four square on the hall mat.

Miss Cliffe closed the door again and sat down, still trembling.

"I'm not myself today," she said. "That's the first time I've ever lost my temper with a servant, but," she clenched her fists and her stout figure quavered, "to *dare* to say there was bad luck on the place. . . Like rats leaving a sinking ship, that's what they are."

"Hadn't you better see the policeman?" said Euphemia gently.

"I can't. . . I'm no better than that fool. . . I can't go to her room again. . ."

"Perhaps it will do if I see him," said Euphemia.

She went into the hall, and the thickset policeman greeted her with something of relief. The place had seemed to be full of tears and frightened faces. This large cheerful-looking woman brought to him a sense of comfort and relief. He was accustomed to dealing with tears and hysteria. He had, in fact, been chosen for this errand because of his fatherly yet respectful way of patting weeping women on the shoulder. He wouldn't have to pat this woman on the shoulder. She was the sort who did the patting. He was conscious of a feeling of comradeship with her, as if they were fellow initiates of a secret society of shoulder-patters.

"A sad affair, mum," he said, speaking in a hushed voice that suggested some enormous creature walking lumberingly and unnaturally on tiptoe.

"Yes. . . Miss Cliffe is rather upset. Could you do your business with me?"

"Yes, mum. I want a few particulars about the room, that's all. . . . May I go up?"

"Yes."

Euphemia led the way up to the bedroom and opened the door. There was a shrouded figure on the bed, the face uncovered. The eyes were closed, but on the white lips was the snarl of a trapped animal. Euphemia's heart seemed to stop beating, and an icy chill spread over her body. Somehow she had been unprepared for this. The policeman threw her a quick glance. She was feeling upset. . . . A look like that on a dead face was enough to upset anyone. They shouldn't have left it uncovered. With a swift movement of his large red hand he drew up the sheet, then glanced again at Euphemia. Her face was still pale, and she was holding the bed-post with a hand whose knuckles showed like bare bones. It had given her a proper shock. . . . But she wasn't the sort one patted. She was the sort one treated as if she were a man, pretending not to notice. He turned back and did a little unnecessary writing in his note book. . . . When he looked at her again, she had got herself in hand.

"That's all I wanted, mum," he said. "It's really just a matter of form."

He clumped down the stairs behind her.

"Please give Miss Cliffe my apologies for bothering her again," he said. "A very trying time for her. . ." Euphemia had thrown off the horror that had seized her so suddenly and unexpectedly upstairs. The colour had returned to her cheeks, her smile was her own smile—friendly, all-embracing. Only her heart was beating a little more quickly than usual.

"It's very trying," she agreed, "but she's keeping up splendidly."

A strange sense of desolation swept over her as the blue-clad figure turned to go. It had seemed to fill the house with an immense safety. As it vanished, the horror crept out again, ready to seize her by the throat should she give it the slightest chance. She passed the open door of the lounge. Several women sat there, talking together in

whispers. They turned pale scared faces to her as she went by. They made her think suddenly of small animals, huddling together in terror at the passage of a beast of prey. Were the others hiding in their holes? The chair where Miss Lewes used to sit crocheting was empty.

"He's gone," she said briskly to Miss Cliffe, who was still huddled in her basket chair. "And now," she touched the bell, "you're going to have a cup of strong tea."

"I'm ruined," moaned Miss Cliffe, "I shall be bankrupt in a week."

"Nonsense! . . . Where's Mrs. Lewes?"

"Didn't I tell you? Her daughter died. The baby came too soon. Mrs. Lewes has gone to live there to look after the baby and the other children."

There was a silence in which Euphemia saw Mrs. Lewes, dressed in black, sitting in the basket chair beneath the apple-tree on the lawn. The baby lay in her lap, wearing a robe of finest cambric trimmed with Valenciennes lace. Derek and Beatrice played together on the grass at her feet.

It was as if in the silence that followed, Miss Cliffe too saw something of the picture. She sat up, pushed back a strand of her disordered hair, and sighed deeply.

"Isn't it dreadful," she said, "the way things *happen*!"

"They've got to happen," said Euphemia. "We'd be just like cabbages if they didn't."

"What did that policeman want?"

"To get some particulars about the room."

"How silly! They've not enough to do, that's what is wrong with them. Did you go in?"

A wave of nausea swept over Euphemia as her mind veered away from the memory.

"Yes."

"You say we'd be like cabbages if things didn't happen. Well, I shouldn't mind nice things happening. What I object to is things like *this* happening."

Euphemia shook her head.

"*Everything's* got to happen," she said. "It makes a pattern. Pleasant things alone wouldn't make a pattern any more than you could make a pattern out of no other colour

than white. Nothing's happened to me for forty years, and so I know what I'm talking about. I don't care what happens to me now, as long as *something* happens. It all goes to make the pattern, and I don't want to miss any of it."

Staring in front of her, she forced her spirit to return to the darkened room, draw back the sheet, and look at what it hid, and as she looked the horror vanished suddenly, leaving a heart-rending pity. She held the tortured face to her breast.

"Why are you smiling like that?" said Miss Cliffe.

"Like what?"

"As if you were nursing a baby."

"Have you noticed," said Euphemia in the tone of one who makes a sudden discovery, "that if ever you try to understand anyone they turn suddenly into a baby?"

"You're talking nonsense," said Miss Cliffe peevishly.

"Here's your tea," said Euphemia.

An elderly woman in a print dress came in quietly, put down a tray by Miss Cliffe, and stood looking at her.

"Now don't you take on, Miss," she said. "It's a bad time, but we'll all soon forget it. As for that hussy Gladys, we're well rid of her."

At her entrance Miss Cliffe had automatically drawn herself up. "Thank you, Hannah," she said, graciously dignified. "You're a great comfort to me. You'll see that Mrs. Lancaster's tea is sent up to her, won't you?"

"Yes, Miss."

The maid withdrew, and Miss Cliffe, taking a small comb and mirror from the capacious bag she always carried about with her, began to tidy her hair.

"What a sight I look," she said, and added almost complacently, "Hannah's a loyal old thing. I knew I could count on her. But it's been such a strain keeping up before them, and I felt I just had to have someone I could let myself go with. You didn't mind my sending for you, did you, dear? I feel so much better now." She had resumed her air of brisk efficiency. "One just wants to be able to give way for a little in comfort, and then one feels better."

"I think you're splendid," said Euphemia, "and now I must fly back to Hampstead. Mr. Host's giving an interview, and they may need me for something."

She had a sudden vision of her employer putting out the encyclopaedia, opening the book of poetry, hiding the lighter magazines. . . She hoped that the interview had gone off well, that the man had asked the right questions, said the right things. She felt like a nurse who has left her charges "dressing up" and must hurry back to see that they have not hurt themselves or each other.

"An interview!" repeated Miss Cliffe with an expressive little shrug that said, "You can't expect me surely to be interested in trifles like that."

"You'll send for me again if you need me, won't you?" said Euphemia.

"Yes, but I think I shall be all right now," replied Miss Cliffe. "You've been such a help. There's something—I don't quite know what it is—but you sort of keep the horrors away."

Outside on the pavement Gladys, red-eyed but aggressive, stood waiting for her 'bus, wearing a beret at a rakish angle and carrying a suit-case. She drew her skirts away from Euphemia with exaggerated disdain as she passed.

XXI

As Euphemia entered the hall, Miss Pearson came out of the library, closing the door softly behind her. Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes shining. She looked almost pretty.

"Oh, Miss Tracy," she said in an excited whisper, "it's going *wonderfully*. He's at his best, and you know what that is. Oh, I do so *hope* that it's going to make people see him as he really is. He's never had justice done to him, you know."

"Has he been here long?"

"The interviewer? Over an hour. They're going into things thoroughly. Mr. Host has such beautiful ideas about everything. Well, you know that from his books, don't you? And, of course, it takes some time to explain them fully, and they're useless unless they're explained fully." A shadow flitted over her radiant face. "I'm not sure that the man who's come is quite—quite *appreciative* enough. He doesn't seem to be encouraging him to talk as an interviewer should. Still, he's taking down everything he says, and that's all that matters, I suppose. Mr. Host is talking *beautifully*. . . I'm staying at hand to be ready when he rings for me. He occasionally wants references in his books, you see, and I know just where everything is."

She was standing as if poised for flight, her eyes fixed eagerly on the library door.

"Was your friend better?" she said absently.

"My friend?"

"Haven't you been to see someone who's ill?"

"Someone had died at the boarding-house where I stayed before I came here."

"How sad!"

The tone was absent, the eyes still fixed in anxious readiness on the library door.

"She'd committed suicide," said Euphemia suddenly.

"Dreadful!" said Miss Pearson, but the horror in her voice was perfunctory. "He's just been reading that beautiful bit in *Flitting Mists* on love. Do you remember it? I hope the interviewer got it down right. I must make sure of that before he goes."

The library bell sounded, and she sprang to the door. As it opened, Euphemia caught a glimpse of a bored-looking youth in the act of smothering a yawn with a notebook. She took off her things, then went to her room and began to look through the tradesmen's books. Suddenly the door opened, and Brian Host appeared. His face wore its usual boyish grin, but there was a hint of angry defiance in it.

"May I come in?"

She laid down her pen.

"Yes."

He entered and stood on the hearthrug, looking down at her.

"Will you have my old bedroom got ready for me, please?"

"Yes. Are you coming to stay here?"

"I'm coming to live here." His grin broadened. "I've come home to father."

She stared at him.

"You've—what?"

"I've come home to father. She's gone home to mother, so I've come home to father. I've brought all my things. My suit-case is downstairs. The old boy's having a charade of some sort in the library, so I couldn't barge in and tell him. But he won't mind. He'll say 'Yes, my boy,' and go on thinking out the love scene on the blasted heath or whatever the next chapter happens to be."

"Tell me about it," said Euphemia.

"There's nothing to tell," he said lightly, as he dropped into the chair opposite hers. "It's over, that's all. She can stay with her hag of a mother. I've finished with both of

them. She said she wished she'd never married me, and I certainly wish to God I hadn't married her. But it's easily undone these days fortunately. . . You just go to a hotel with a female and send her the bill. At least so I gather from modern fiction. The old hag's as pleased as Punch. Says I was never worthy of her darling, and that she's foreseen this from the first week of our marriage. She's worked hard enough for it, anyway."

Euphemia was silent for a few moments. She had a sudden consciousness of something bright and fragile trampled in the mud, of a tragedy infinitely more terrible than Miss Furmore's death.

"You must tell me just what happened," she said breathlessly.

He looked slightly sulky.

"I've told you," he said.

"You haven't. . . Tell me more."

He waved his arm round the room. "The details don't matter. . . It's over. It's all been a mistake. . . I thought I was marrying her, but it turned out I was marrying her mother. I told her she had to choose between me and her mother, and she chose her mother. She's gone back to her mother for good tonight, and," he grinned his angry little-boy grin, "I've come back to father. And if she thinks I'm going to beg her to make it up, she's mistaken. That's happened once too often. Conditions laid down by her mother. Apologies to her mother. Starting off again with her more under her mother's thumb than ever. I made up the last row of this sort we had, and the condition of her coming back was that she should spend one night every week at her mother's. This time it would be two, I suppose, and so on till she was living there permanently. A divorce would be far simpler. I'm going to make the arrangements tomorrow, and the day after tomorrow I'll send her the hotel bill, and she can put it through as quickly as she likes, and I hope to God I never see her again."

"I wish you'd tell me just what happened," said Euphemia patiently.

"I keep telling you. There's nothing to tell. It was just

like all the other rows. More or less. I came home from work, and she rang me up to say that she was staying for dinner at her mother's, because Aunt Fanny or Aunt Arabella or someone I'd never heard of had come over unexpectedly, and she wouldn't be home till late. I told her again what I thought of her mother, and she said she was sick of me and she was going to stay with her mother until I'd apologised. She said she was coming for her things at nine o'clock. She'd expect, of course, to find me there waiting to apologise to her. Well, all she'd find would be a note from me, saying she could jolly well go back to her mother, and I'd gone back to my father. I said I'd send her the hotel chit as soon as I got it."

Euphemia rose to her feet, a towering figure of wrath.

"How *could* you behave like that?" she said sternly, "It's disgraceful. You must go back at once."

He laughed shortly.

"I'm not going back. We're through with each other, and the sooner everyone knows it the better."

"I don't wonder she's left you," said Euphemia, "but you're going back to her, and she's coming back to you. I don't know how you've the face to stand there telling me how shamefully you've treated her."

"I haven't treated her shamefully," he muttered sulkily. "No one can say I've treated her shamefully."

"You undertook to love and cherish her," stormed Euphemia. "You took her for better or worse, and you desert her like this."

"I'm not deserting her," he muttered. "It's been her fault from the beginning."

Euphemia slipped into her bedroom and returned in a few moments, wearing her coat and hat.

"You're going back," she said shortly.

His lips were fixed in a defiant grin.

"I'm not," he said.

She turned to the door without a word and went down the stairs. He followed her irresolutely. A suit-case stood in the hall. She picked it up.

"Is this yours?"

He took it from her, hesitated, put on his hat, and followed her down the drive. She had hailed a taxi and was getting into it.

"Give him the address," she ordered curtly.

He gave the address to the taxi man and followed her sheepishly into the taxi. There he sat, slumped in a corner, glowering at her.

"You're making a damn fool of me and of yourself," he said. "That's all you're doing."

She said nothing.

The taxi drew up at a block of service flats.

"Wait here," said Euphemia to the man.

She went with Brian into the lift and entered the tiny flat. It looked very smart and empty and dreary, with its new furniture, its up-to-date bareness, its elusive but unmistakable air of homelessness.

"You must stay here till I come back," said Euphemia curtly. "Where does her mother live?"

He gave an address. He was gazing moodily at the hearth where could be seen fragments of a torn-up note. He went into the adjoining room, then came out, his boyish face set angrily.

"She's taken every blessed thing she's got," he said.

"I shan't be long," said Euphemia.

When the butler opened the door, Euphemia felt a momentary ebbing of her courage. She had inherited from her parents a deep respect for butlers. Her courage, however, returned when she was shown into the drawing-room, where sat Elaine's mother, magnificent in wine-coloured embossed velvet, Elaine, nymph-like in white satin, and, presumably, Aunt Fanny in black lace. The panelled room was tense with emotion. Mrs. Darlington looked angry and triumphant. Elaine was as white as her satin. One glance at Aunt Fanny told you that she revelled in domestic crises.

"Yes?" said Mrs. Darlington with majestic hauteur to Euphemia. "May I ask what is your business with my daughter?"

"I want to speak to her alone," said Euphemia stoutly.

Emotion and haste and the events of the day had dishevelled Euphemia. She had put her hat on without consulting her mirror, and her hair was untidy, her cheeks flushed. Mrs. Darlington raised her lorgnette.

"I'm afraid I haven't the pleasure of your acquaintance," she said icily.

"It's Miss Tracy, Mr. Host's housekeeper, mother," said Elaine in a voice whose languidness was not quite convincing.

"Mr. Host's *housekeeper*!" repeated Mrs. Darlington in a voice eloquent of outraged dignity. "And what is your business here, please?"

"I want to speak to your daughter alone," said Euphemia.

Mrs. Darlington's majesty became Olympian.

"Anything you have to say to my daughter—and I can't imagine what you can possibly have to say to my daughter—may be said to her here and in my presence."

"Very well," said Euphemia, and, turning to Elaine, said abruptly, "You've treated your husband abominably and you ought to be ashamed of yourself."

There was a horrified silence. Then Elaine burst out passionately.

"How dare you say that? He's treated me abominably."

"Silence, Elaine!" said Mrs. Darlington. "Don't stoop to defend yourself to this woman. . . ." She turned to Euphemia, with an expressive gesture of dismissal. "Leave this house at once. How *dare* you force your way in to insult my daughter?"

"He's behaved shamefully to me," protested Elaine. "He's never loved me. He told me he never wanted to see me again. He's gone off with another woman now. He told me so. We're going to get a divorce."

"As soon as we possibly can," supplemented Mrs. Darlington grimly. "The matter is arranged in every detail. My daughter and I are going abroad tomorrow, and we shall stay abroad till the divorce is put through. My lawyer informs us that there will be no difficulty about it. And now will you go, please?"

"Did he send you?" said Elaine.

"No," said Euphemia. "I heard how badly you'd treated him, and I had to come to you. I felt sure that if only you realised——"

"Will you go, or shall I send for the butler to turn you out?" demanded Mrs. Darlington, her hand on the bell, her regal form quivering.

The lust of battle entered Euphemia's heart. The butler, after all, was about her size and looked rather flabby.

"Send for the butler to turn me out," she said.

Mrs. Darlington withdrew her hand from the bell. She remembered a strange story she had heard about this woman's having been mixed up in a brawl in a boarding-house. It had been rather a confused story, and Mrs. Darlington had never gathered exactly what it was all about, but it left no doubt that the woman was a brawler. This house had never witnessed a brawl. It must not witness one now. Aunt Fanny looked slightly disappointed at the withdrawing of her sister-in-law's hand. Her pale protruding eyes went from one to the other. She was almost licking her lips. She saw innumerable intimate gatherings hanging avidly on her words as she described this scene.

"Then perhaps, Miss Blake——"

"Tracy."

"Miss Tracy, you would kindly say what you have to say and go. I don't wish to have to call the police."

"I wish I'd never met him," burst out Elaine. "He's done nothing but insult me ever since we were married. Trying to keep me from ever seeing anyone but him!"

"Fortunately," said Mrs. Darlington, "Elaine has me to protect her. I never liked the boy. I never wanted the marriage. I told Elaine that she would live to regret it, and she has done. Divorces are put through easily these days, and even he has the sense to see that it's the only possible way out of the situation."

"It *isn't* the only possible way out of the situation," said Euphemia to Elaine. "You've deserted him, and you must go back to him. You've never given him a chance. You've never tried to make a home for him. You've let your

mother wreck your marriage from the beginning. You should have put your husband first, and you didn't."

Elaine gazed at her with a set white face.

"If you'd heard the things he said to me," she said, and added in a low voice, "I shall never speak to him again."

"Of course he said things to you," said Euphemia. "You deserved them. And I expect you said things to him."

"My dear Miss Trail——" began Mrs. Darlington majestically.

"Tracy," said Euphemia.

"Tracy. I still fail to see why you should interest yourself in our affairs. Your presence here is a piece of insufferable impertinence. Still, you may take this explanation back to my unfortunate daughter's father-in-law, if he has had the extreme bad taste to send you here. His son has failed to make my daughter happy. He has had every chance, and he has failed to make her happy. That is all there is to be said in the matter."

"It's she who's failed to make him happy," said Euphemia.

Mrs. Darlington raised a white be-ringed hand.

"Pardon me, my dear Miss Black——"

"Tracy," said Euphemia.

"Tracy. I have studied my daughter's happiness from her babyhood. I've had no thought in my life but to make her happy. It's been torture to me to watch the way this wretched boy has neglected her."

"It's been your fault from the beginning," burst out Euphemia. "You can't bear to think of her belonging to anyone but you. You wanted to keep her just as if she wasn't married, and he wouldn't stand it. Of course he wouldn't stand it. No man would stand it. You've come between them deliberately ever since they were married. You didn't care two pins about her happiness. You just wanted to keep her for yourself. You wanted her still to belong to you. You're a wicked, selfish, greedy old woman."

Mrs. Darlington's aristocratic face became suffused with a blackish purple. She trembled from head to foot. Her mouth worked as if she were trying to speak but were

choked by some impediment. For a moment Euphemia thought that she was going to have a fit. Then she flung out a quivering arm towards the door and gasped, "Go!"

"Yes, I'm going," said Euphemia, "and she's coming with me."

She laid a hand on Elaine's white arm. Mrs. Darlington seized the other arm, but Euphemia held firm. Mrs. Darlington's majestic dignity had fled; she was flushed and panting; her eyes were bloodshot. . . . She pulled. . . . Euphemia pulled.

Elaine, swaying helplessly this way and that between them, burst suddenly into sobs. Aunt Fanny's eyes and mouth opened to their fullest extent, as she watched the amazing spectacle . . . that dreadful dishevelled woman, Georgina red-faced and gasping, Elaine a sobbing human tug-of-war. The memory would be meat and drink to her for many a day to come, and meat and drink to all her acquaintances. The only shadow on her joy was the uneasy suspicion that no one would believe her. She imagined herself describing this scene, and she saw faint smiles of incredulity upon the faces of her audience. It was unfortunate that she had a reputation for exaggerating. It would be impossible to exaggerate this scene, but, of course, they could not know that.

Suddenly Mrs. Darlington lost her hold and tottered back into a chair. Elaine fell against Euphemia and was drawn quickly and firmly through the door and out to the waiting taxi. A hysterical scream reached them as they drove away. Elaine sank back into a corner of the taxi, still sobbing.

"I've been so miserable."

"It's all been your own fault," said Euphemia.

"Mother said it was his."

"It wasn't," said Euphemia. "It was yours. You must tell him you're sorry and start all over again. You must make a *home* for him."

"I have done," sobbed Elaine. "It's a beautiful flat. It cost ever so much. Mother paid for nearly everything."

"It's not a home," said Euphemia.

Elaine sat up and dried her eyes. She seemed to realise where she was for the first time.

"I can't go back to him," she panted. "I promised mother I'd never go back to him. Besides, he's arranging a divorce."

"No, he isn't," said Euphemia. "He's at home waiting for you."

"At the flat?"

"At home."

The taxi drew up outside the block of flats. Euphemia paid the taxi and dismissed it. The man drove off, gazing back at them curiously. Queer goings on. This odd-looking old bird with her hat over one ear taking a young man there and then going off and fetching a girl. Girl in a rum state. Drugged as like as not. Supposed to be a respectable enough neighbourhood, but you never knew, not in London. And it didn't do to be too curious either. His wife was a one for the pictures, and liked his accounts of his day's doings to have a bit of spice in it. This would suit her all right. . .

Upstairs in the tiny sitting-room the young husband and wife faced each other. Brilliant red patches blazed in Elaine's white cheeks. She made a desperate effort to regain her usual air of bored arrogance.

"Brian——!"

Suddenly they were in each other's arms, apologising to each other, comforting each other, vowing eternal fidelity. Euphemia slipped out into the little kitchen and made some coffee. When she returned, Elaine was sitting on Brian's knee, nestling against his shoulder.

"It's all been my fault," she was saying.

"No, darling, it was mine," said Brian.

"*She* said it was mine," said Elaine.

"No, she said it was mine," said Brian.

"It was both's," said Euphemia. She put the tray with the coffee on the table and stood on the hearthrug, looking down at them.

"Now look here," she said, sweeping her arm round the room, "you've got to give up this place."

"Oh, but why?" said Elaine. "Everyone says it's charming."

"You must get a little house somewhere in the country or in the suburbs. It doesn't matter where. But get a little house and do your own housework."

The telephone bell rang in the hall, and Euphemia went out to answer it.

"Hello."

A cold majestic voice answered.

"Is that you, Miss Brace? I wish to speak to my daughter at once."

Euphemia put back the receiver for a moment, then laid it down beside the telephone.

"A wrong number," she said, returning to the sitting-room and taking up her position again on the hearthrug. "You've got to get away from this place and make a home. A little house anywhere. And you must have a baby."

"Mother says I'm too young," said Elaine.

"Well, you're not," said Euphemia.

She gazed dreamily into the distance, seeing again the figure of the young 'bus conductor.

"You want a nice little house and jolly kids and all having fun together. People who think there's anything in marriage without kids are balmy."

"It sounds rather nice," said Brian grinning, "the way you say it."

"Might be worth trying," said Elaine. "It would be a change, anyway." She had recovered her air of bored arrogance, but something naively childlike showed behind it.

"And you mustn't see too much of your mother," said Euphemia.

"N—no," agreed Elaine slowly. "Perhaps she doesn't *quite* understand about Brian."

"And I must go now," said Euphemia, "I expect I've got the sack already."

"We'll engage you as housekeeper if you have," said Brian.

"It's a nurse you want, not a housekeeper."

She set off to walk back to Hampstead. She had paid her last penny to the taxi driver. She did not feel tired, however; she felt fresh and invigorated. She had enjoyed her struggle with Elaine's mother. The couple she had just left would not, of course, live happily ever after. It was quite possible that they would separate again that very night. They would begin to discuss Elaine's mother, and their anger would flame out anew. Elaine's mother might even go to fetch her home. Euphemia, on arriving at the Hampstead house, might find Brian with his suit-case there before her. It was all uncertain—gloriously, thrillingly uncertain. The thought of the uncertainty of everything intoxicated Euphemia, as if it had been some heady wine.

Her thoughts went back over the events of the day. She saw Mr. Host, anxious, nervous, making his preparations for the interview. . . . Miss Pearson, eager, adoring, standing in the hall, her eyes zealously fixed on the library door. . . . Miss Furmore, lying on her narrow iron bedstead, the dead face flinging its last defiance at the world. (Yes, the horror was still there. She passed on quickly.) . . . Mrs. Lancaster prostrate in her room, revelling in her delicate sensibilities, worshipping at her own shrine. . . . Miss Cliffe, indulging in the luxury of "giving way," then resolutely buckling on her armour again. . . . The policeman who had given her those friendly conspiratorial glances, whose presence had warded off the horror . . . saw again the amazing incredible tussle for the weeping Elaine . . . saw Elaine and Brian clinging to each other passionately . . . and far, far off, Mrs. Lewes in a peaceful old-fashioned Vicarage, tending a tiny flame of life with reverent, wrinkled hands. . . . And, as the pictures flashed before her eyes, she seemed to hear, through the throbbing of the traffic and the voices of the passers-by, a dull distant thudding that was the beating of the heart of the world.

XXII

EUPHEMIA recognised Dr. Marriott's voice with a sudden thrill of excitement.

"Mr. Host's engaged just now, I'm afraid." She said. "May I take a message?"

"It wasn't Mr. Host I wanted. It was you. . . . Isn't this your free afternoon?"

"Yes."

"You promised that you'd spend one of your free afternoons with me, you know. What about this afternoon?"

She thought of the evening when he had taken her to dinner and a theatre. It was one of the things that one did not allow to happen twice. She must say quite firmly that she could not come with him, but to her surprise she heard herself saying.

"Thank you, I'd love to. . . . Yes, I'll come this afternoon."

"Good! The whole expedition is going to be in your hands, so think out just what you want to do."

She put back the receiver, feeling depressed. She did not know why she had said that she would go out with him. He had asked her from a sense of pity, because she had told him that she knew no one in London. She did not belong to his class, and it would be that hateful evening over again. But during the morning her spirits began to rise despite herself. The domestic atmosphere was one of unredeemed gloom, and the thought of escaping from it even for an afternoon was a pleasant one. Mr. Host had shut himself into his study to work directly after breakfast, foregoing his customary half-hour with the morning paper. He had

passed Euphemia in the passage without looking at her. Everyone knew the cause of his dejection. Miss Pearson was almost in tears. An account of the interview had appeared in the *Torch* that morning, and, as Miss Pearson said, "It's a *parody* of it, Miss Tracy. Just a word here and there, as you might say. All his beautiful thoughts on an author's responsibilities and all the exquisite bits of poetry he quoted left out. The account of his life absolutely *mangled*. They don't even mention the memories of his childhood that he told the reporter. It's—well, it's heart-breaking. I daren't say a *word* to him about it, of course, but I honestly think he ought to *do* something. Surely this Authors' Society he belongs to could take the matter up. They're supposed to exist to remedy injustice. I feel I'd like to write to them myself."

She sat sipping her tea and gazing with her melancholy, slightly protruding eyes out of the window. She looked particularly unattractive this morning. She had on a new dress of navy serge that she had made the week before. Besides emphasizing her sallowness, it fitted unusually badly, and the white collar that she had pinned on to it seemed to find the utmost difficulty in accommodating itself to the line of the neck.

"Miss Tracy," she said earnestly, "do you think that it can ever be *right* to do something *wrong*?"

"That depends," said Euphemia cautiously.

"Because I've *done* something wrong, and I'm going to do it again. . . . I was brought up to be absolutely straightforward and truthful. I—I scorn anything not quite straightforward, but"—the prominent eyes in the earnest sallow face gazed solemnly at Euphemia—"it would be a *relief* to tell you, Miss Tracy, and see what you think of it. I daren't tell Edie. She's too good, she wouldn't understand. And sometimes the thought of it worries me when I'm trying to teach the children to be straightforward and that sort of thing, because the thing I've done isn't straightforward, and," with a sudden flash of spirit, "I'm going to do it again."

"What is it?" said Euphemia.

"Well, sometimes when he's had a beastly review and he's felt depressed," Miss Pearson's face flamed suddenly, and she turned her head away, "I simply don't know how to tell you . . . I *know* you'll think I'm wicked . . . but I've written a letter to him as if I were just a reader of his books, someone he didn't know, telling him how much I like them. I've given a London Post Office as the address and made up a name to sign. I'm awfully good at disguising my handwriting . . . and—well, it may be wicked, but it cheered him up *tremendously*. It turned him into a different person as soon as he read it . . . and he's sent me the most *beautiful* answers. . . ." Flushed and defiant, she met Euphemia's eyes. "And I'm going to write him another tonight, I don't care *how* wicked it is. He's been so abominably treated by this beastly paper, and I know it will cheer him up."

Euphemia laughed—her low comfortable chuckle. "I think it's splendid of you," she said.

"But it's untruthful," protested Miss Pearson, shaking her head. "Our father was a Plymouth Brother, you know, and we were very strictly brought up. That's why I daren't tell Edie. She'd be so shocked. Ever since father died she's looked after me. You know she has such very high ideals. Often when I've taken to people and thought that I'd have liked to have them for friends and I've asked them to tea for Edie to meet them, she's found faults in them that I'd never have seen, and then once she's seen faults in people, of course, I can't go on asking them to the house. She's got such *very* high ideals, and I must be loyal to her after all she's done for me."

"What has she done for you?" said Euphemia.

Miss Pearson's eyes opened wide.

"Why, she's given me a home," she said. "What more could anyone do for anyone than that? But it was—the other thing I wanted to ask you about—the letters. . . ."

"Go on writing them whenever you feel like it," said Euphemia with twinkling eyes. "It doesn't do anyone any harm, does it?"

"N—no."

"Well, it can't be wrong then."

"Oh, but it *is* wrong," said Miss Pearson reproachfully. "I don't want to lose my principles. I mean, if I'm doing a wrong thing, I'd rather do it knowing it's wrong than think it isn't."

Euphemia chuckled again.

"Very well then, it's wrong, but you're quite right to do it."

Miss Pearson rose slowly. "I must go now. You haven't minded me talking to you, have you? It helps one to talk sometimes. . . I'll write tonight. He'll get it tomorrow, and it ought to cheer him up. . . ."

Maggie came in to take away the tea things.

"Well, good-bye for the present," said Miss Pearson, glancing into the mirror and absently patting the collar in the places where it was most unaccommodating. "We've just got to get through these times as best we can, haven't we?"

"Everyone seems down in the dumps this mornin'," commented Maggie when the door had closed on Miss Pearson. "'E seems down in 'em an' no mistake. Somethin' to do with 'is revoos, I suppose." She sighed deeply as she put the teapot upon the tray. "Well, I've no time for other people's troubles. I've got enough of my own."

"He hasn't got another tooth coming through, has he?" said Euphemia anxiously.

"No, but 'e's got a cold in 'is nose somethin' *shockin'*." Maggie stood and gazed fiercely in front of her, as if sternly accusing the Fates. "'Is pore little nose is almost *ror*."

"Tell your mother to wipe it with cotton wool," said Euphemia, "then it won't get so sore, and clean it with vaseline and some stuff I'll give you. I'll give you some cotton wool too, and a pot of vaseline. I expect your mother gets through a lot."

Euphemia had forgotten everything else in her concern for Helbert's "ror" nose.

When two o'clock approached she began to be conscious of a depression that grew heavier and heavier as the minutes slipped by. "What a fool you were not to say that

you couldn't come," she said to herself severely. "It'll be just like the other time. You'll be miserable and he'll be bored."

But as soon as the car drew up at the front door, all her apprehension vanished, and she felt lighthearted and excited like a child setting out on a "treat."

She had dressed herself very carefully and neatly in the brown costume, pulling the brown felt hat low over her forehead and pinning all possible ends of hair out of the way. ("I won't get untidy, anyway. He shan't be ashamed of me that way.") She greeted him with a beaming ingenuous smile, and he felt a sudden reawakening of his interest in her. He had been desperately bored by her the last time he had met her, and he had not wished to arrange this meeting, but he had an uneasy memory of having suggested it, and he hated not to carry out his promises.

He must think of her as a child, then perhaps he would not be so bored.

He opened the door of the car, and she took her seat beside him. "Where would you like to go?" he said.

"Let's go into the country."

"Where?"

"Anywhere. Just the nearest way into the country." He saw for the first time that she had with her a string bag packed with parcels.

"I've brought tea for us," she said. "I thought that perhaps you wouldn't think of it."

He drove in silence. . . . She didn't chatter at any rate. She sat very straight, gazing about her with bright interested eyes. He was aware of an eager excitement emanating from her, but she did not fidget. His curiosity leapt to life again. . . . There was something mysterious about her. How old was she? She must be forty at least. The stocky solidity of her body suggested more, but on the whole he thought forty. It was that vague suggestion of youth in her that puzzled him. It puzzled him chiefly because he could not tell exactly where it lay. Her features were as heavy as her body. Even her eyes—bright and

soft and rather shy though they were—did not suggest youth. It was just there—mysteriously, indisputably there.

"Let's stop here a minute," she said, "and look at the view."

He drew up on the brow of a hill.

"It's marvellous, isn't it?" he said.

She nodded, and again there was silence.

He leant back in his seat and relaxed, his eyes fixed dreamily upon the blue distance. There was something restful about her. Strange, because one did not usually associate youth with restfulness. He closed his eyes. . . .

Euphemia sat drinking in the loveliness of the view that lay before them. The countryside—field and meadow and woodland—rolled away till it seemed to melt into the sky. But chiefly she was conscious of the weariness of the man beside her. Hardly moving her head, she glanced at him and saw his eyes drooping. Then she sat, with a slight smile on her lips, as rigidly motionless as if she held a sleeping child in her arms. Looking down the hill, she could see the little roofs showing here and there among the trees and the little spirals of blue smoke that rose up from them. The sound of a woman singing in a farm in the valley floated up through the still air. The smile on Euphemia's lips grew deeper, tenderer. . . . It wouldn't be beautiful, she thought, without the little houses and the people. At least, it wouldn't to me. There'd be something frightening about it.

The man beside her stirred and woke up with a start.

"How long have I been asleep?" he said.

She smiled at him.

"Not long," she said. "You should have gone on sleeping. It would have done you good."

"How dreadfully rude of me," he said. But he was not as horrified and ashamed as he ought to have been. He felt as if this woman beside him were in some way his mother, and one need not, of course, feel ashamed of going to sleep in one's mother's presence. . . . Then he remembered that a few moments ago she had been a child setting out on a treat. He tried to shake off his sleepiness.

He had been desperately tired. He was working too hard, had been working too hard for years. He felt more refreshed than a short nap could possibly account for. He glanced at her again, as she sat large and immobile beside him. She was, at any rate, a change from the type of women who consulted him all day. A nerve specialist should not have nerves, but he suspected that he had been developing them lately. A cynical element, hitherto unknown to him, was creeping into his attitude to women. He was beginning to think of all women as self-centred, hyper-sensitive, and hysterical. Something in him clutched at Euphemia as a drowning man clutches at a straw. . . . He must think of her when next he was inclined to yield to that impulse of cheap cynicism. ("They're all the same. God pity the men who marry them.") She belonged to a class that he was apt to forget because he so seldom came in contact with it. There was peasant blood in her. She was sound in mind and body. She came of a stock of slow, enduring men and women who cheerfully accept a life of toil as their natural lot, who never think about themselves because their life leaves them no time for it. Stupid, probably, but—someone to think of when next the monotonous complaints of his patients began to get on his nerves, something to keep away the cheap cynicism that he hated.

"Where are we?" she said.

"Ide Hill. . . . It's in Kent . . . we're looking over the Weald."

"It's beautiful. . . ."

"It's nice to get right away from people, isn't it?"

She smiled.

"No, I'd never like to do that."

He glanced at her.

"You aren't one of those people who crave for an uninhabited island?"

"No. I'd feel as if I didn't exist at all on an uninhabited island. What I mean is," she paused, trying to find words to express her thoughts, "it's only other people that make one exist, somehow. Just as a father can't be a father unless he's got a son to be it to, so a person can't be a person

unless he's got other people to be it to. . . . I don't know how to put it. I expect it sounds silly to you."

"No," he said slowly, "I think I understand what you mean. There's something in it, of course. It's not good for man to live alone. . . . Would you like to move on?"

"Yes. . . . Where are we going now?"

"Where you like. Do you know this part at all?"

Suddenly she was an excited child again.

"No. Let's go just anywhere, shall we? Do you mind?"

"Not at all."

"Just turning down roads without looking at the signposts or knowing where we're going." Beneath her excitement she was apologetic. "I've always thought that that was what I'd like to do if I had a car."

Something of her excitement communicated itself to him. He felt younger, less tired, less disillusioned than he had felt for a long time.

"Come on," he said, "it sounds splendid. We'll choose roads in turns, and we mustn't look at the signposts. Looking at signposts is against the rules. If you look at a signpost, you miss your turn."

The next hour passed quickly. They had to turn back from several narrow lanes that led only to farm-houses. When they found themselves back at the same spot that they had left some minutes before, their laughter rang out—Euphemia's slow chuckle and Marriott's boyish shout. It occurred to him that it was a long time since he had laughed outright. Yes, it did one good to get away from one's work, to do something quite different, something absurd like this.

A blackbird's song rang out with sudden clearness.

"The ousel-cock, so black of hue,
With orange tawny bill,"

he quoted.

She finished the quotation—

"The throstle with his note so true,
The wren with little quill. . . ."

—then said eagerly:

"Let's stop here."

"Why?"

"There's a churchyard. I want to go into it."

"But why? Do you like churchyards?"

"Yes."

"Why do you like churchyards? I shouldn't have thought you had morbid tastes."

"Churchyards aren't morbid. They're interesting."

He followed her slowly into the country churchyard, and she went from grave to grave, reading the inscriptions and putting together the little family histories.

"That's his second wife. His first wife's buried over here. Her baby was only a week old when it died. . . What a shame. . . Look, this must be John Pettigrew's father. John Pettigrew married Pleasance. She died the year after him. Here's another Pleasance. Perhaps it's her mother. If it is, she died when the little Pleasance was only three. I wonder who brought her up. . . . Perhaps her aunt brought her up. . . Her aunt's grave's here. . . I'm glad she married John Pettigrew. I feel sure they were happy and had a lot of children. . . Here's the eldest daughter, Mary. She didn't marry, she died when she was fifty. Here's Ralph Pettigrew . . . that must be a son. He married someone called Charity. Perhaps it was Charity Forrester's daughter. Here's Charity Forrester's grave. Her husband died when she was forty, and she lived to be eighty. I expect her grandchildren used to come to tea with her every Sunday. Perhaps this is one. . . She's called Charity, too, and she married Mark Colter. I think this is his sister. She's fifteen years older than Mark. . . Oh, look, here's Dorothy Jane Whitehead. . . I think she must have been James Whitehead's sister. He was only thirty when he died. His father's over there."

The air in the little churchyard seemed to strike cold, and a sudden weariness seized him.

"You aren't afraid of death?" he asked.

She turned to him still smiling and moved a strand of hair from across her eyes.

"No," she said. "I rather look forward to it. I don't

mean that I don't like being alive, but—there's a sort of thrill in finding out a secret."

"If it's a nice secret."

"It is a nice secret. Things don't end up differently from the way they've gone on. Life's good, and so death must be good?"

A cheap and easy optimism, he thought, combined with the peasant's fatalism.

A clock struck four.

"Shall we have tea now?" she said. "Let's go and find a nice place."

They went back to the car.

"Drive slowly," she said, "and I'll keep a look out."

He drove slowly along the road. He felt a curious exasperation with her. He was a scientist. He liked things to be classified, and she refused to be classified. Child . . . mother . . . peasant . . . thinker . . . innocent . . . shrewd. The armour of cynicism in which he had begun almost unconsciously to enclose himself revolted most of all from her unreasoning optimism. Cheap and easy, he said again to himself.

"Look . . . that's a good place," she said.

He drew up. A narrow path led from the road through a field and up to the top of a hill that was crowned by a solitary stunted tree.

"Up there," she said eagerly. "That's all right, isn't it?"

He smiled, his good humour restored. He could not have told what was his opinion of this woman, but that she should have chosen to have tea on the top of a hill was consistent with it. Any other woman he knew would have chosen a picturesque spot in a wood.

"Splendid!" he said.

"I must get some water for the kettle first," she said.

"I expect I could get some at that cottage."

"Shall I go and ask?"

"No, let me go."

She took a small kettle from the tightly packed string bag and knocked at the cottage door. An old woman opened it. There was a few moments' conversation, then Euphemia

went in, and the little door shut. The minutes passed. . . Marriott looked at his watch impatiently. When she had been there for a quarter of an hour, he wondered whether to go and ask for her. Perhaps she had felt ill and had not liked to tell him. Then he remembered her flushed, eager face and was sure that she had not felt ill. He began to feel lonely and desolate and rather aggrieved. At the end of twenty-five minutes the door opened, and she reappeared. She stood at the door talking to the old woman for another five minutes before she joined him. The old woman watched them depart, an expansive smile upon her nut-cracker countenance.

"Have I been a long time?" said Euphemia, breathlessly apologetic. "She was telling me about the Pettigrews and the Whiteheads and the Colters, and I didn't notice how the time was going. Her mother was a Pettigrew. She had a photograph of Ralph Pettigrew. She said that Jane Whitehead brought up her brother's children when he died. She was a beautiful woman, and a lot of men wanted to marry her, but she wouldn't have any of them. Do you remember? Her grave was just by the gate. . ."

He was smiling.

"I never thought of a churchyard as a jigsaw puzzle of that sort before."

They left the car in the road and walked up the path to the hill-top. He carried the string bag and a rug, and she carried the kettle of water. He spread the rug on the top of the hill under the stunted tree that the north wind had bent to an acute angle with the ground, then sat down and took off his hat. A curious peace possessed him, a peace that emphasised his weariness. He must slack off work and take a partner. A peace like this should be a man's natural heritage. His recreations, rare enough, were all wrong—golf, dancing, going out to parties. They left one as tired as one started.

"I shall think of you," he said, "the next time one of my patients tells me that her husband doesn't understand her."

She smiled at him.

"Do they often tell you that?"

"They always tell me that."

She was looking down at the valley.

"The Pettigrews lived at that thatched farm-house by the church," she said. "One of them is there still. Ralph Pettigrew's son. He married a gypsy, and she ran away from him when they had been married a year. . . . And there's the cottage where the Forresters used to live. Do you see? Over there. Charity Forrester married Ralph Pettigrew, you remember. She was the last of them. There was a son, too, but he was wild, and left the district, and no one knows what happened to him."

"You've never seen these people and never will see them," he protested. "Why should you be so interested in them?"

"Oh, just because they're people," she said. "Sometimes in church I can hardly listen to the sermon for watching the people and wondering what relation they are to each other, and if they're happy together and if they've got any children and things like that. . . ."

She was unrolling the little packets, each in its covering of table napkin and grease-proof paper. The kettle simmered on its blue flame.

"You go to church?" he said.

"Yes. Every Sunday that I can manage it. I like the psalms. There are lovely things in the psalms. Things like 'The river of God is full of water' and 'Then shall all the trees of the wood rejoice before the Lord.' And there's 'The Lord is king, be the people never so impatient. He sitteth between the cherubims, be the earth never so unquiet.' It helps to say that to yourself when you're getting all fussed up because the fish is late. I like the prayers in church, too. It does one good to pray. I don't mean just ask for things, but pray."

"You believe in God?"

"Yes."

"Why do you believe in God?" he said curiously.

She gazed into the distance.

"Grass, I think," she said dreamily. "Grass and water. Chiefly water. Only God could have thought of water."

She laid out a small tablecloth and placed on it her array of sandwiches and salad and cakes and fruit.

"What a spread!" he smiled.

"I like tea to be a meal. Especially when it's out of doors. I eat a lot at every meal," she ended simply.

He seldom had tea at all, but he found himself eating largely of her sandwiches. The open air had made him hungry.

"So you find life good," he said meditatively.

"Yes."

"Most people would tell you that they've looked for happiness all their lives and never found it."

"Perhaps they look in the wrong way," she said, "and perhaps they look for the wrong thing."

"There may be something in that," he said slowly.

"We seeken faste after felicitie,
But we go wrong ful ofte truely,"

she quoted.

He smiled again.

"What do you read besides Shakespeare and Chaucer?"

"Only Malory and the Bible," she said. "I've tried to read modern novels, but somehow I can't care what happens to the people in them. I care about real people but not people in novels."

They finished tea. She sat, silent and motionless, gazing out over the valley. She had taken off her hat, and the wind had disordered her hair. There was something rugged and massive about her figure, something primitive and elemental, something oddly akin to the hill on which she sat. And yet there still came from her that curious suggestion of eager questing youth that had first compelled his notice to her.

Sitting near her like this, he felt as if, cold and starved, he were holding out both hands to some revivifying warmth.

"Tell me something about yourself," he said. "What sort of a child were you?"

"I don't know," she said casually. "Do you see the woman in that cottage garden? She's cutting a cabbage

for her husband's supper. . . He came back from his work just after the children came back from school. She walked to the end of the road to meet him with the baby. It can just walk. Look! There it is coming out of the door now."

He realised that, unlike every other woman he knew, she was entirely uninterested in herself.

They packed up the remnants of the meal into the string bag and went down to the car. She had put her hat on to her untidy hair at a rakish angle. They drove on in silence down the road.

Suddenly, rounding a corner, they came upon a country fair. The blare of the roundabouts, the shouting of the showmen, the screams of girls on the swings and see-saws, the ringing of bells, the beating of drums, filled the air. He was putting his foot upon the accelerator to hurry past this desecration of the quiet of the countryside, when she laid her hand on his arm. Her eyes were bright with excitement.

"Let's go in," she said breathlessly. "They used to come to the village, and I used to watch them from the window. I couldn't leave father. I used to long to go to them. . . Let's leave the car here and go. . ."

He followed her to the entrance.

Looking back afterwards, that part of the day seemed to him utterly unreal. It was either a dream or a memory of his boyhood. He saw himself flying on the roundabouts, whirling down the helter-skelter, pulling the giant swing to dizzy heights, laughing uproariously, forgetful of everything in the world but the childish excitement that she seemed to communicate to him.

Then, just as she was stepping down from the swing, she slipped and fell on to the ground. He helped her up and saw that, though still smiling, she had paled.

"You've hurt yourself?" he said.

"It's nothing," she replied.

"Come to the car. . . I'll help you. . ."

She could not walk without his help. In the car he felt her foot with skilled gentle fingers.

"It's a nasty sprain," he said.

The shock of the accident had sobered him, and he had assumed his professional manner.

"I'm afraid it hurts."

"I'm sorry to give you all this trouble . . ."

He settled her in the back of the car, so that she could keep her foot up on the seat, and drove homeward.

She sat upright, leaning against the side of the car, her hands clasped tightly together. The pain shot like flames up her leg. She looked in front of her, a smile on her white lips, a fierce exultation at her heart. It was as if the pain initiated her into a new and intimate fellowship, linked her by an indissoluble bond to the heart of humanity itself.

He drove as quickly as he could, aware that she must be suffering. Occasionally he caught a glimpse of her through his driving mirror -- a curious dishevelled figure, her hat awry on her untidy hair, a strange smile on her tightened lips.

Then he forgot her. The afternoon had given him a new zest for life. Something in him that had been dead had awakened suddenly to life. . . . One ought to live, not drug oneself by overwork. Once he had been willing enough to live. His mind went back to his youth. He remembered his old passion for his cousin. He remembered his tragic despair when she refused him. He remembered how later he had taught himself to fill his life with work. Later still, when she was a young widow, she had given him unmistakable hints that she would like him to renew his offer, but he had decided then to give up his life to his work, to cut out of it love and passion. What a priggish fool he had been . . . Lydia . . . the memory of her pretty girlish face came back to him through the years, quickening his pulses with an unfamiliar excitement. He felt a sudden fierce contempt for the withered, dry-as-dust creature he had made of himself. . . He thought of her as she had been when he saw her last, her hair as pretty as in her girlhood despite its greyness, her cheeks smooth and soft and rosy, her eyes still lucidly blue. . . . It wasn't too late for something warm and human to enter his life. She was, after all, the only woman he had ever loved.

XXIII

"I've come to ask your advice," said Imogen, sitting down cross-legged on the floor by Euphemia's sofa.

"What about?" said Euphemia.

She was lying on the sofa with her foot up. Dr. Marriott had been to see it again that morning and had ordered several more days' complete rest. Euphemia was doing her work as best she could, telephoning, mending, and interviewing the maids from her sofa.

Imogen shook back her small head with its mop of chestnut curls. It was her most characteristic gesture.

"Oh, I don't know," she said, suddenly vague. "Lots of things . . . nothing in particular. . . . I say, the atmosphere is very serene this morning, isn't it?"

"Is it?"

"Yes. Downstairs I mean. Father's had a letter from an admirer. A be-autiful letter. Telling him how marvellous he is. Saying that every word he writes is an inspiration. You know the sort of thing. He's occupied at present in writing a be-autiful answer. In his most be-autiful handwriting. It's to be sent to a post office in Golders Green. Quite a lot of father's admirers write from post offices. I expect there's some psychological explanation if only we knew it. . . . Unsympathetic home circles, probably. . . . Any coco-nut ice, Tracy?"

"Yes . . . in that tin."

Since the sweet-making episode Euphemia had kept a tin of home-made sweets always ready in her room for Imogen.

Imogen took a piece of coco-nut ice, and sat down again cross-legged, nibbling it with small white teeth.

"How's your foot, Tracy?"

"Much better."

"It was a nasty sprain, wasn't it? Moral, don't go out joy-riding with doctors. They stick at nothing to make a job for themselves. How did he do it? Pushed you down from behind, I suppose, when you weren't looking. . . . I went to see Brian and Elaine last night."

"How were they?" said Euphemia.

"Quarrelling like hell, as usual. They've decided to take a cottage in the country for some unknown reason, and Brian wants Buckinghamshire and Elaine wants Somerset, and they've practically agreed to separate again, because neither of them will give way. The only difficulty is that Elaine can't go back to her mother, because she's had a row with her."

"What about?" said Euphemia.

"I don't know. I gather that her mother went over there and blackguarded Brian, and Elaine lost her temper and flew out at her, and her mother went off in what books call high dudgeon, and so Elaine can't very well take refuge there from Brian just at present. . . . Anyway, they'd completely forgotten what they were quarrelling about, as they generally do, and were just quarrelling for quarrelling's sake, so I brought them back to the point and suggested that they drew lots, and I left them getting papers ready. Whichever way it came out, of course, they'd start quarrelling again. Why do people marry, Tracy?"

"I don't know," said Euphemia. "Why are you going to marry Mr. Callander?"

The freckled heart-shaped face suddenly grew serious. The gold-flecked eyes gazed into space.

"I don't know that I am, Tracy. I don't know what I'm going to do."

"It's Mr. Cornish, isn't it?"

Imogen nodded, her eyes still fixed dreamily on the window behind Euphemia's head.

"If you love him," said Euphemia, "you must give up Mr. Callander and marry him, of course."

"But I love them both, Tracy," said Imogen. "I'm

leading a double life, and I'm sick of it. I'm engaged to them both. Peter thinks that I've broken it off with Denis. You see, he never meets Denis now. They never cared for each other, and, of course, they have quite different sets."

Her mask of reckless gaiety slipped from her. Her child's face looked defiant and unhappy.

"I'm *wretched*, Tracy. I don't know what to do. . . . I sometimes think the easiest way out would be to put my head in a gas oven like that woman at the boarding-house where Mrs. Lancaster lives. . . ." The impudent smile flickered over the sharp little gamin face. "Only unfortunately we haven't any gas, and I don't know how to electrocute myself."

Euphemia was looking at her gravely.

"Which do you love?" she said.

"I love both," said Imogen. "I love them in different ways. I love Peter as a friend. I feel safe and happy with him. I trust him. . . . I feel calm and—and not excited with him. Denis excites me. He makes love to me and then I don't care what happens. I can't explain. I don't seem to belong to myself at all. I'm not sane in a way. Then afterwards I hate him."

"That's passion," said Euphemia slowly. "That won't last. It's the other one you ought to marry."

"I know," said Imogen, "I mean I know when I'm sane. But, I tell you, Denis makes me insane. He's got a sort of a hold over me, and he knows it. He knows that he's only got to start making love to me, and he can do what he likes with me. There's something evil in me that he's found out how to get at. That sounds melodramatic, but it's true. I hate him when I'm myself. He doesn't care. I think he'd rather have it that way."

"Make a clean break," advised Euphemia. "You'll never be happy with him."

"I'm afraid of Denis," said Imogen slowly. "He's weak, and weak people are frightening. They've no restraint. They don't care what they do to avenge themselves. Denis is dreadful when he's angry. He shouts and screams. I've

often tried to break it off. He knows he can always get me back, even when I don't want him and try not to come back. And, when he's got me back, he has his little revenge. He punishes me. He'll be perfectly sweet and then quite suddenly let me down in front of people, say something or do something hateful to me. He can say the beastliest things of anyone I know. Things that hurt you so that just for a minute you can't breathe. He enjoys hurting me. He does love me in his own way, but it's a beastly way."

"You must break off your engagement to him," Euphemia said again.

"I don't think that I should marry Peter even if I did," said Imogen slowly. "Denis wouldn't let me. He wouldn't care what he did to stop me. I'm frightened of him. I shall never escape from him. I hate him, but he's *got* me somehow. I shall marry him. . . . Sometimes I let myself imagine that I'm with Peter on his farm, miles from anywhere. I'd love it, you know. You think I wouldn't, but I would. I'm sick to my soul of what people call having a good time. . . . But it's one of the things that can't happen. Whichever way I think of, Denis is there stopping me."

"Nonsense!" said Euphemia tartly.

"It isn't nonsense. I tell you, he wouldn't care what he did to stop anyone else having me."

Emily entered and said, "Mr. Cornish is waiting for you, Miss."

When Emily had gone, Imogen arose and stretched slowly. "I shall go out to tea with him and pretend that I'm going to marry him and get away from it all. And then to-night I shall go out with Denis and know that it was all a silly dream. . . . Oh well," her arms dropped slackly to her side. "Life's like that, isn't it? I'm sorry I've yowled so. . . . I was pulling your leg. Forget it all, won't you? I'll go now and put my hat on and go out with my he-man from the great open spaces. He's such a scream, Tracy. He asks me if he may smoke."

When she had gone, Euphemia rang her bell.

"Will you ask Mr. Cornish to step up here and speak to me?" she said to Emily.

He entered her room, large, thickset, and clumsy.

"I'm sorry to hear about your foot," he said. "How is it?"

"Much better. . . . I wanted to speak to you about Imogen."

"Yes. . . . I hoped I'd see you." He stood on the hearth-rug, looking down at her. "Why won't she let me tell her father we're engaged? What's she afraid of?"

"She's afraid of Denis Callander."

"I thought so. She's still playing about with him, isn't she?"

"Yes."

"Engaged to him?"

"Yes."

He struck one hand into the palm of the other.

"God, I wish I could take her out of all this."

"Why don't you?"

"How can I? I can't get hold of her. I'd give my life for her. I *know* that I could make her happy, and she knows it too. But she's afraid. Look here, Miss Tracy. She's never had a chance. Her father's a futile ass, and her aunt disliked her. But she's not spoilt. I see her absolutely clearly. I know she's playing a double game with me and young Callander. And yet I know that she's sound and true in spite of it all. If she marries young Callander she'll never know another moment's happiness. He's rotten all through. Rottener than you know, or I could tell you. What am I to do? She won't face things."

"You must do this," said Euphemia slowly. "Don't wait for her to break it off with him and tell her father and all that sort of thing. She's frightened and tired. Get a licence, and then, when you've got it, just tell her that she must marry you. She will. She wants to. . . ."

He frowned.

"I don't like it," he said. "It sounds a cad's trick."

"It's the only way," said Euphemia.

"You mean--spring it on her suddenly?"

"Yes. Don't give her time to think. Don't give her time to tell Denis Callander or her father. Nothing on earth

would make her father see Denis Callander as anything but a promising young poet and a son-in-law who will reflect credit on him. She'll thank you for the rest of her life."

He was frowning, irresolute.

"I don't like it," he said again.

The door opened suddenly, and Imogen came in.

"Hello," she said. "Have you come to Tracy's lair too?"

She opened the tin of coco-nut ice and popped a piece into his mouth.

"Come along. Tracy's sick of us. She wants to read her collection of prurient classics in peace."

She went out, drawing him by the hand and blowing a kiss to Euphemia.

"Good-bye, darling."

When Imogen had gone, Miss Cliffe called to enquire about Euphemia's foot. She looked ill and seemed depressed and listless.

"I shall never be the same again after that dreadful affair," she said, "and neither will the house."

"Nonsense," said Euphemia. "You'll soon forget it."

"I won't," protested Miss Cliffe. "I won't forget it. Neither will anyone else. Miss Beech has gone. She's not much loss, but a straw shows the way the wind blows. Her bedroom was next door, you know. She said that the thought of it got on her nerves. *Nerves!* What's a social worker to do with nerves? And what about my nerves, I'd like to know? I've got another guest. One of those dreadful women who've been everywhere abroad and can't stop talking about it. Always telling you how cheap and good hotels abroad are. The sort I hate, but I'm not in a position to pick and choose nowadays. She seemed pleased with everything, then quite suddenly said that that part of London didn't suit her and she'd have to go. Obviously a put-up tale. One of the maids had told her. . . . I daren't even try and let the room it happened in."

"You must give it time," said Euphemia, pouring her out another cup of tea. "Every week makes it further off. . . . People soon forget."

"I don't," said Miss Cliffe. "I can keep up while I'm on duty, but I go all to pieces as soon as I'm alone. My spirit's gone. I can't care any more somehow. By the way, Mrs. Lancaster's all cock-a-hoop because Dr. Marriott's asked her to go out to dinner with him next week, which makes twice in a fortnight. She's an old flame of his, you know. And it's my belief she's going to get him at last. . . . I've often seen that happen. A man works like a nigger till he's about fifty. 'Thinks of nothing and cares for nothing but his work. Then suddenly gets tired of it, and looks round for his old flame. Finds her and, if she's free, marries her. I bet you anything they're married before the end of the year. He looked quite different the last time he came to see her. Younger and more alive. . . . Oh yes, I know the signs. Poor devil, I pity him. He's one of the nicest men I know, but it's always the nicest men who get caught by pussy cats, and she's pretty enough still. . . ."

She put down her cup and stared gloomily at Euphemia.

"I never used to chatter like this, did I? It shows I'm going all to pieces."

"Have a sandwich," said Euphemia. "You oughtn't to keep that room empty, you know. The place will never seem right till you've got someone sleeping there."

Miss Cliffe shuddered.

"I've tried," she said. "I had my things moved there, and I went up there, and—well, I couldn't. I couldn't get into the bed. I found her in the bed, you know. I took my things back to my own room. . . . I can't expect anyone else to sleep there, if I can't sleep there myself."

"Mr. Host said that I could have my holiday next month. He'll be going away. I'll come to you and take that room. I shan't mind, and it'll be a nice holiday for me staying at the Club."

Miss Cliffe shook her head.

"No, you mustn't. I shan't let you. You saw her there too. You can't sleep in that bed."

Euphemia gave her slow chuckle. "The place isn't made that I can't sleep in."

"You mustn't pay, anyway."

"Of course I shall pay. I shan't come if I can't pay. What else should I spend my salary on?"

"Clothes."

"Clothes!" echoed Euphemia. "There's no fun in getting the sort of clothes you think I ought to wear. If I could buy the sort of clothes I like—nice, cheerful, dressy things."

She gazed dreamily into the distance.

"You mustn't," said Miss Cliffe anxiously. "You've promised not to buy anything without asking me."

"I know. I won't. . . . But there's something so depressing about a dress that hasn't any trimming. . . . Well," briskly, "I'm coming to you for my holiday, and I'm having Miss Furmore's room, so that's settled."

"It's awfully good of you," said Miss Cliffe. "It will make a difference." She looked at Euphemia's large smiling face. "Anyone sleeping there wouldn't make a difference, but *you* would. I shan't mind going into it once you've been there. . . ."

She straightened herself with a jerk. "I don't want you to think that I've let myself go altogether. I've lost my spirit, and the place is going down, but I keep up all right while I'm there. I'm quite my old self while I'm there. Only—it's—I'm pretending to be my old self, if you know what I mean. All the heart's gone out of it. . . ."

"I know," said Euphemia. "But you've just got to hang on and everything will be all right again."

Miss Cliffe shook her head doubtfully.

Euphemia's next visitor was the author himself, accompanied by Elissa Durrant. He looked dazed, flattered, apprehensive, and vaguely pathetic.

"We come to pay our call on the invalid," he said with charming solicitude. "Is the foot better today?"

"It's nearly well, thank you," said Euphemia. "I hope to be going about as usual next week."

She wondered whether he had come to see her in order to display himself to Miss Durrant as a considerate employer, or because Miss Durrant was beginning to frighten him and he wished to escape from a *solitude à deux* with

her. She suspected the latter. Miss Durrant stood in her favourite attitude on the hearth, her elbow resting on the mantelpiece, her hand against her cheek, her brilliant black eyes staring in front of her. She wore a mandarin's coat and heavy jade earrings. Her shining blue-black hair was drawn tightly back from her high forehead.

Having made his enquiry about the foot, Mr. Host seemed at a loss how to continue the conversation. Miss Durrant remained apparently lost to her surroundings. Mr. Host relaxed suddenly as at some pleasant memory and, taking an envelope from his pocket, considered it with a smile.

"A little note of encouragement," he said. "It's wonderful to think of someone miles away, someone one has never seen or heard of, who yet knows and understands one perfectly."

"You're bound hand and foot by convention, Adrian," said Miss Durrant suddenly in her deep thrilling voice, obviously continuing a conversation that had been taking place before they entered the room. "That's what spoils your work. If you'd only free yourself ——"

"I - I'm not conventional," said the author unhappily.

"You are, Adrian. You're a slave to old shibboleths. Take your last book. . . . You imply that the heroine was 'saved' from something when her brother prevented her going to Paris with a married man. Well," she flung out her hands, "tell me, please, just what she was saved from?"

The author flushed. "Er—well ——" he began unhappily, then hesitated.

"You see," said Miss Durrant triumphantly, "you don't know. You've no idea. You're tied and bound by old shibboleths and conventions. What could possibly have happened to her that would not have been a deep and fruitful experience?"

"Well—er———" began the author again.

"Granted," said Miss Durrant in her deep voice, "that the man's affection for her was not lasting, that the liaison would not have been of long duration—even so, the girl would have enriched her nature by her association with

238 THE ODYSSEY OF EUPHEMIA TRACY xxiii

him. Every association, physical and mental, is an enrichment. Your work would be immeasurably better if you could bring yourself into the larger sphere that modern thought has opened out."

The author's embarrassment and uncertainty were pitiful. He was never quite sure of himself or his standards. A terrible doubt about everything was one of his secret torments. As if for comfort he patted the pocket in which reposed his letter.

"I think I'm the last person in the world," he said with a sort of desperate lightness, "to be a slave to shibboleths."

"Would you *prove* that to me, Adrian?" she said, fixing her burning eyes upon him. "Would you defy convention if I asked you to?"

He glanced about him, flushed, harassed, but still vaguely flattered.

Then his eye lighted on Euphemia, and he smiled a smile of quick relief.

"Well, I'm sure that all this can't be very interesting to Miss Tracy," he said. "Quite sure the foot's getting on all right?"

"It's getting on splendidly," said Euphemia.

"I shall expect an answer to my question some time, Adrian," said Miss Durrant, and then turned abruptly to the door.

As he followed her, half frightened, half fascinated, it seemed to Euphemia that the glance he threw her was one of appeal.

XXIV

EUPHEMIA saw little of Imogen during the next few weeks. When they met Imogen flew past with a wave of the hand and a flippant greeting. Occasionally Euphemia caught a glimpse of Peter Cornish or Denis Callander waiting for her in the hall.

Elaine and Brian had drawn lots and in accordance with the result had taken a cottage in Somerset. Elaine had come to tell Euphemia about it.

"It's a darling cottage," she said. "I'm simply crazy about it. And I'm going to run it all myself with a woman from the village. I'm having lessons in house work and housekeeping, and it's fascinating. Do you know, I adore washing. Especially ironing. It's going to be the most marvellous fun."

"What does your mother think of it?" said Euphemia curiously. Her struggle with Elaine's mother was one of her most stimulating memories.

"She's annoyed about it. She chose the flat, you see, so as to be near her, and, of course, she's rather huffed. She liked to have me there for company and to help her with things. Naturally she's not keen on the idea of a cottage in Somerset. . . . I've quite made it up with her, but I think it's as well on the whole not to see too much of her. She and Brian don't understand each other."

She looked very wise and young and happy. The bored, arrogant expression that had been an unconscious imitation of her mother had gone.

"Brian and I quarrelled a little over the cottage," she admitted, "but we haven't quarrelled since, and I'm quite sure that we're never going to quarrel again."

"Oh yes, you are," said Euphemia, smiling. "You're going to quarrel hundreds of times."

"No, we shall never quarrel again," said Elaine firmly, "though Brian is frightfully trying sometimes. . . . By the way, Tracy," she lowered her voice confidentially, "what's Imogen playing at?"

"How do you mean?" said Euphemia.

"Those two dreadful men she goes about with. Denis Callander's a rotter. Everyone but Imogen's father knows it. I believe that Imogen knows it, too. . . . I told Brian that he ought to horsewhip him, but Brian says that brothers only do that in his father's novels. In real life they go their own way and let their sisters go theirs. But he's *dreadful*, and so is that other."

"Why is the other dreadful?" said Euphemia.

"Darling Tracy, he's a - the only word is clodhopper. He hasn't a single idea or a single wisp of conversation. And his *gure*! And his *suits*! . . . I don't know how Imogen can be seen with him."

"I think he's a really good man," said Euphemia.

"I daresay he is," said Elaine. "So is Brian. But it's possible to be a really good man and to be nice-looking and entertaining and clever too, as Brian is." She sighed complacently. "I daresay I'm spoilt by having Brian. He does make all other men seem so ordinary." She rose. "Well, I must go and choose curtains for the cottage, and then I've got a cookery class. I'm so glad your foot's all right again. You shall be our first visitor at the cottage, Tracy. We shall never forget that we owe it to you."

Denis Callander came in a few minutes after Elaine had gone. He stood in the doorway, smiling his peculiar smile that was half a snarl, and looked at Euphemia across the room.

"Where's Imogen?" he said.

"She's gone out."

"With whom?"

"I don't know. I haven't seen her since yesterday afternoon."

He came in and shut the door behind him.

"She's with Cornish, I suppose?"

"I don't know," said Euphemia.

"Well, I'm going to wait till she comes in, if I have to wait till after midnight." Again he drew his lips back from his teeth. "She's got to learn that it doesn't pay to double-cross me, as they say in detective stories."

"Don't be melodramatic," said Euphemia quietly. Looking at him, she noticed again the lines of dissipation on his handsome young face. The pupils of his eyes were oddly dilated, and the whites of them showed yellow. He took out a cigarette, but his fingers trembled so much that he abandoned the attempt to light it. There was about his whole body a strange repellent restlessness.

"Won't you sit down?" said Euphemia.

"No, thank you," he said with ironical politeness.

"You're in this too, aren't you?"

"This what?"

"This double-crossing business."

"I don't want her to marry you, and I do want her to marry Mr. Cornish, if that's what you mean."

"Yes, that is what I mean. I shan't forget that you've meddled in my affairs. I don't forget, you know. . . I have old-fashioned ideas about an eye for an eye. No one's ever interfered with me and got away with it."

Suddenly the vaguely sinister atmosphere that had hung about him ever since he entered the room left him, and he became an absurd little boy uttering ridiculous threats.

"You can't hurt me in any way," she said, smiling. "Hadn't you better wait for her downstairs?"

"No, thanks," he muttered. "Not with that old fool blethering about. . . He'd want to read me some of his damned tripe, and I'm not in a mood for it."

He went to the window and stood there looking down at the dusk-shrouded garden. Then he spoke with a sudden quiet intensity.

"This is the last time she fools me."

He swung round to her, and she saw beads of sweat on his forehead.

"I'm going to take her tonight," he went on. "And when I've taken her I'll see she doesn't get away from me."

"That's foolish," said Euphemia. "You can't take her against her will."

"It won't be against her will. She wants me. She's always wanted me. I could have had her a dozen times. . . . I've been a fool. I'm not going to be a fool any longer. . . . She's been tricking me—pretending she'd stopped seeing this man, when she's been with him every day. Well, she's going to pay for it. . . ."

Euphemia felt suddenly frightened. He wasn't an absurd little boy uttering ridiculous threats. He had the dangerous irresponsibility that belongs to weakness, and his vanity amounted almost to madness. She remembered that Imogen had said: "Weak people are frightening. . . ."

"You're talking nonsense," she said brusquely

"Oh no, I'm not," he sneered. He came over to her and stood by her chair, looking down at her, his mouth still twisted into its unpleasant smile. "There's something in Imogen that belongs to me, that's always belonged to me. She can struggle against it as much as she likes, but it's there. I bet you anything that fool's never so much as kissed her. She knows at the bottom it's no good struggling against me. When she's been with me ten minutes, she'll have forgotten everything else in the world. I know how to rouse her. . . . I've never yet met a woman I couldn't rouse. . . . I want Imogen, and I'm going to have her. I was willing to treat her decently as long as she treated me decently, but she's tried to fool me. . . ."

He is ridiculous, thought Euphemia, swaggering, boasting, seeing himself as another Don Juan. Ridiculous but dangerous too. She had seen him turn Imogen's shrinking revulsion into passion by deliberate brutality. There was no pretence in his confidence of power over her.

"You're very absurd," she said severely. "You'd much better go home than make a fool of yourself here."

"Does she always come in to you before she goes to bed?"

"No."

"Oh well. . . I shall see when she comes in. She won't be late. The fool's sure to bring her in at a Victorian hour. Then she's coming out with me . . . and you can lock up for the night. . . ."

He stood at the window, holding back the heavy chenille curtain with twitching fingers. Dusk had fallen, and Euphemia had not turned on the light. She sat there labouring under a curiously oppressive sense of danger. The only sound in the room was the harsh intake of his breath.

Suddenly he spoke.

"Here they are."

They heard the sound of voices in the hall, then footsteps on the staircase. Imogen's voice talking . . . laughing. . . . Euphemia sat motionless in her chair. The boy still stood in the shadow of the curtains. . . . The door burst open suddenly, and Imogen entered. The figure of Peter Cornish towered behind her.

She was flushed and radiant.

"Congratulate us, Tracy," she said, "we were married this afternoon. I've just come back to break the news to father and collect some things for the night."

For the first time she noticed the figure in the window.

"Denis!"

The boy took an unsteady step forward, and it was as if the quiet room were filled suddenly with a sultry stifling heat. Euphemia had a curious conviction that everything about her was unreal. The three taut figures were unreal. The shrill voice screaming abuse was unreal. . . .

Peter Cornish stepped forward.

"Stop that," he said quietly.

The boy stopped, stared at him, then dropped suddenly into a chair and began to sob aloud—harsh, gulping, hysterical sobs.

Imogen stood looking down at him. Already she had changed in some indefinable way. The fear, the shrinking,

the half-unwilling infatuation had gone. Instead was a tenderness that was remote, impersonal.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I'm frightfully sorry. It's all been my fault."

She laid her hand on his shoulder as she spoke.

He flung it off and started to his feet, glaring at her.

Before he could speak, Euphemia hustled bride and bridegroom from out of the room.

The bridegroom submitted reluctantly to the hustling and was obviously anxious to return, but Euphemia put herself between him and the door. She looked at his flushed face and clenched fists.

"It wouldn't really help matters for you to knock him down," she said. "It would only spoil Imogen's wedding day."

"The swine!" he muttered.

"You've won, so you can afford to be generous. Hadn't you better go and tell her father about it?"

"I suppose so."

"We'll all go," said Imogen. "Tracy must certainly come with us; she'll provide the audience. Father's always at his best with an audience, however familiar. . . . Come along, let Tracy go in and break the news, and we'll stay on the doormat while she does it."

As if aware of some unusual event in the house, the author had come out of the library and was standing in the hall, looking vaguely about him. He raised his eyebrows in a whimsical smile when he saw them coming downstairs.

"Well," he said, "and where are we off to this evening?"

"Our honeymoon," said Imogen calmly. "We've just got married. Tracy was coming to prepare you, but perhaps it's best just to blurt it out."

His whimsical smile faded. He looked almost pathetically taken aback.

"Married?" he repeated. "But when? And—er—how?"

"Today and in a registrar's office," said Imogen, "and by a man with a face exactly like a chimpanzee's. Anyway it's done. Quite legally. We've got our 'lines.'"

He said nothing for a few moments. His mental gaze was

fixed on the scene of which she had cheated him . . . a delightful scene in which he figured prominently as father of the bride. He saw himself, tall, handsome, exquisitely dressed, standing by the bride with one arm affectionately about her waist, heard the whispered comments ("Isn't he *charming* . . . father and mother to her . . . I *adored* his last book").

His eyes wandered to Peter Cornish. It was the wrong man. That was the second shock. It was quite the wrong man. Where was the famous young poet who was to have consolidated his father-in-law's literary position? It was all very bewildering.

"But," he smiled his helpless, charming, whimsical smile again, "what about Denis?"

"I found that I didn't love Denis," said Imogen. "I found that I loved Peter instead."

"I assure you, sir," said Peter fervently, "I'll do my very best to make her happy."

Adrian Host brightened. That was the way young men talked in his novels. He looked at him and brightened still more. The young colonial. The man from the great open spaces. . .

"Isn't he sweet?" said Imogen happily. "He's not taking himself off. He really *is* like that. He makes me feel incomplete without a crinoline. We've only been married a few hours, but already I'm beginning to *lean* on him. I think I'm going to change my name to Ivy."

He was still looking at them, smiling vaguely and dreamily. It was, after all, one of his own situations. It would fit excellently into *Snore in Summer* on which he was at work. The father, of course, was in the secret. The daughter sat on his knee, and the young man from the open spaces stood by, and they begged him to agree to this plan. ("Well," he had said, "there's nothing in the whole world I hate more than fuss and ceremony. You know that it's torture to me to display myself in public. . . So far as I'm concerned, my children, it will be an enormous relief, and you have my blessing. No, I won't breathe a word to a soul.")

He put his arm about Imogen, smiling down at her.

"Well, we've cheated them all of a show, haven't we? We've given them the slip all right."

So vividly had he imagined the scene that he now almost believed that it had actually taken place. Denis? There had been a hint of mockery in Denis's manner to him lately that he had not quite liked. And he had begun to wonder whether Denis, after all, really was a great poet.

"I'd like a word with you, sir," said Peter.

"He wants to be asked whether he's in a position to support me in the circumstances to which I am accustomed," said Imogen. "Come in, darling. He *shall* ask you. I'll make him."

Euphemia went slowly back to her room.

Denis Callander was sitting on a chair, his head in his hands. He raised bloodshot eyes as she entered, and she saw that his whole frame was still twitching uncontrollably. His face was grey and drawn. . . . With a hand that shook as if with ague he felt in his pocket and brought out a small metal case. His fingers fumbled unavailingly with the lid for a few seconds, then he opened it and raised thumb and forefinger unsteadily to his nostrils. He drew a long deep breath and relaxed, lying in his chair with closed eyes. Euphemia watched him in silence.

After some moments he stood up, and, going to the mirror, straightened his disordered hair. His hands were steadier, and the colour had come back to his face.

Then he walked to the door and turned to smile at her.

"Good-bye," he said, "and to hell with the whole bloody lot of you."

XXV

IMOGEN spent the weeks between her marriage and departure for Africa in taking lessons in dressmaking and domestic economy. She was more serious over them than Euphemia had ever known her to be over anything. She sailed with her husband at the end of the month. As she packed, she flung armfuls of filmy frocks and underclothes carelessly on to the floor.

"Quite unsuitable for the great open spaces, Tracy. Do what you like with them—wear them or sell them or give them away. Heaps of unsuitable shoes and hats, too. You might set up a nice little Dress Agency on them. I bequeath them all to you."

The author had intended to go down to Plymouth to see his daughter off, but at the last minute Elissa Durrant had asked him to accompany her to a literary dinner at which, she said, he would meet everyone worth while.

"I'm glad that he isn't coming," Imogen confided to Euphemia. "He's an old dear in his own way, but he'd have been an awful nuisance. He'd have been playing Devoted Father Secing Off Only Daughter to a non-existent gallery all the time. There'd have been an effective reproduction of it in his next book. Whenever I've made the fatal mistake of confiding in father—I haven't done it for years, of course, but in my extreme youth I did it once or twice—I've gone hot and cold to see the thing brought into whatever book he turned out next. Nearly all father's heroes, you know, are charming middle-aged men—bachelors or widowers—adored by daughter or niece or ward or something like that. . . . I'd learnt to beware of confiding in father by the time I was ten."

Brian could not leave his work, so in the end only Euphemia went down to Plymouth with the young couple. Imogen wore a green travelling suit and a perky little green felt hat and looked very young and sweet and eager as she stood by the side of her husband on the deck of the *Garth Castle*.

"I never thought that I'd see you look as happy as this," said Euphemia.

"I feel as if I'd been born again somehow," said Imogen. "As if I'd tried one sort of life and hated it and so had been given another. Reincarnated, you know, without the bother of dying and being a baby again. I know I'm going to adore the great open spaces."

A pile of letters was waiting for her on board. They were all letters of good wishes from friends, except one that she read then tore lightly across.

"It's another beastly letter from Denis," she explained. "He wants to spoil things for me, but he can't. I feel as if it were from someone I've never known. He's like a child in a temper. . . . No," to her husband, "I shan't let you read it, and don't scowl like that. You ought to be grateful to him. It was only because you were so different from him that I fell in love with you."

"My one regret," said her husband, still trying to scowl but unable to help smiling as his eyes met hers, "is that I didn't wring that chap's neck before I left England."

"And leave me a widow," mocked Imogen lightly. "Always so thoughtful, aren't you, darling?"

Peter Cornish held Euphemia's hand in a clasp that nearly made her cry out.

"Good-bye," he said, "and if I don't make her happy I ought to be shot."

"Good-bye, *darling* Tracy," said Imogen. "You've been an angel. . . . Give the poor old dear my love and tell him from me to beware of Brains."

"*They're* all right," said Euphemia to herself as the two waving figures on the boat vanished from sight.

When she reached home, the author had returned from the literary dinner, accompanied by Elissa Durrant. Elissa

wore one of her favourite embroidered shawls. Enormous earrings of barbaric design hung on either side of her narrow face. Her blue-black hair was like a tight satin cap. Euphemia went into the library to give him Imogen's message slightly modified.

"They got off very nicely," she said, "and she sent you her best love."

Miss Durrant, as usual, fixed on Euphemia a gaze that seemed to focus something just beyond her.

The author appeared to welcome this interruption.

"Come in and sit down, my dear Tracy," he said. "Come in and sit down and tell me all about it. My thoughts have been with the child all day."

He threw a slightly defiant glance at Miss Durrant as he spoke. She turned her slow burning gaze to him.

"I don't think that that's quite true, Adrian," she said. "You know what I think of conventional insincerity. Till we've learnt to accept truth there's no happiness for any of us."

He smiled uneasily.

"I think that no one is more willing to accept truth than I am," he said.

Her eyes became deeper, more intense.

"You're going to prove that to me," she said.

His eyes shifted from hers evasively, and a faint flush crept into his cheeks.

"My plans are so very uncertain just now," he said. "I'm expecting the proofs of *Burnt Ashes* any day."

"You could correct them in Paris," said Elissa.

Euphemia escaped as soon as she could and went upstairs to tidy Imogen's room. She picked up the discarded frocks from the floor, shook them out, and replaced them in the wardrobe. She held each one at arm's length and gazed at it wistfully before she put it away. Large, thick-set, middle-aged as she was, the young girl in her revelled in them. She drew her fingers over the silky fabrics, she feasted her eyes on the soft glowing colours. . . Not *quite* her style, of course, even if they had been large enough. She stood motionless, the filmy dresses hanging over her

arm, a far-away look in her eyes as she saw the dress of her dreams—a deep red purple . . . a magnificent lace collar . . . flounces . . . a large hat with purple feathers curling over the brim. . . Then she seemed to see Miss Cliffe's horrified face gazing at it and laughed aloud.

"I don't care," she said. "I'm going to have it one day. And if I can't ever have it in my life I'll be buried in it."

The next morning when Miss Pearson came into Euphemia's room for her eleven o'clock tea her eyes were red-rimmed, and her sallow face wore a look of almost comical misery.

"Anything wrong at home?" said Euphemia.

"Oh no."

"Children all quite well?"

"Yes. . . Cyril's got over his cold wonderfully."

"Sister all right?"

"Oh yes. She's much better."

"Have you been very busy there lately?"

"No. Now the warmer weather's come, of course, there's less work in the house. No fireplaces to do out. More washing and ironing, of course, with the children's summer things, but heaps less work on the whole."

"What's the matter then?" said Euphemia.

Miss Pearson's face flamed, and her eyes avoided Euphemia's.

"What do you mean?" she said, with a half-hearted attempt at evasion.

"Something's the matter," said Euphemia, "so you might as well tell me and get it over."

Miss Pearson put her head down suddenly upon her arm and burst into tears.

"Out with it now!" said Euphemia, placidly authoritative.

"I c-can't tell you," sobbed Miss Pearson.

"You must," said Euphemia.

"It's—so—t-t-t-t-terrible," said Miss Pearson. "You wouldn't b-b-believe it."

"I can believe most things," said Euphemia.

Miss Pearson raised her swimming eyes.

"I—I'd never have believed it," she said, "if I hadn't been f-f-forced to."

"That doesn't tell me anything really definite," said Euphemia patiently.

"I can't tell you—I can't *say* it," said Miss Pearson, relapsing again into tears.

After a few moments she raised her head again and, mopping her eyes with a soaked handkerchief, said:

"It's that Miss Durrant. . . She's—oh, I can't *say* it—she's trying to make him go to Paris with her. And—oh, Miss Tracy, he's so—so *noble*, but she's got a sort of *power* over him. . ."

"It might do him good, you know," said Euphemia thoughtfully.

"Oh, it couldn't, Miss Tracy. You don't understand him. He'd never forgive himself. He'd never forget. He—I don't think he'd ever be able to write again. You see, he's just like the heroes in all his books, but—once he'd done a thing like that he'd never be able to—to put himself in the hero's place again. His books wouldn't *live* any more."

"Well, perhaps he could put himself into the villain's," said Euphemia. "It might make his books more exciting."

"Oh, you don't understand him," wailed Miss Pearson. "He'll be wretched for the rest of his life, if—if this happens. He'll never be able to respect himself again, and he's the sort of man who can't live without self-respect. He has high ideals, Miss Tracy. He's always been on the side of the angels. . ." She glanced at the clock, straightened her hair, and dried her tears carefully. "I must go to him now. It's—it's *torture* to me, Miss Tracy, to feel how torn and unhappy he is. I'm a Christian, but I can't help wishing that—oh, that anything would happen to her. You see—you see, I've found out some things about her."

"What have you found out?" said Euphemia.

"I hardly know how to tell you *that* either. It's—oh, it's *terrible*. She used to live with Malvern, the poet, and—and he left her. He couldn't stand the way she tried to manage his affairs. He couldn't call his soul his own, you

know. And she's terribly extravagant. She's always in debt. Her stuff's awfully highbrow, but it doesn't bring in money. That's why she fixed on *him* . . . because he's got money and he's so chivalrous and—oh, it's all so *dreadful*. He's had such a hard life."

"Has he had a hard life?" said Euphemia.

"Oh yes. Oh, Miss Tracy, of *course* he has. His wife dying and leaving him with those two motherless children. . . . So *dreadfully* sad. And his daughter—well, I don't want to say a *word* in criticism of her, but she's not been what a daughter *ought* to have been to him. I know that if I'd been daughter to a man like that -- --" she broke off, flushing. "That's a silly thing to say, of course. But she never seemed to *realise* what a wonderful privilege it was to be his daughter."

In the days that followed Euphemia watched her employer and Miss Durrant with a certain quiet enjoyment. He reminded her irresistibly and ludicrously of the heroine of an old-fashioned melodrama in the process of being seduced—shrinking, fascinated, helpless. Miss Durrant on her side was the perfect villain—bold, dark, determined. One day the next week Miss Pearson came for her eleven o'clock tea looking white and desperate. She even refused a piece of Euphemia's short-cake—a thing that had never happened before.

"No," she said, "I simply can't eat anything—even that. I can't bear it. To stand by and see him *ruining* his life. I know that some men could do it without thinking twice, but not Mr. Host. He's too *good*. He's too honourable. . . He's too *pure*. He'll never forgive himself. He'll never feel the same afterwards."

"Well, perhaps it won't come off, after all," said Euphemia.

"But it will. That's what makes me feel so—so *dreadful*. It—it's all arranged. Next week-end. They've got the tickets. He's—*miserable*. And he'll never be able to write again. He'll have betrayed the best part of him. She's meeting him every day between now and Saturday. She's not giving him a chance to get free from her. Why, even

this afternoon they're going on the river. She said that it was years since she was on the river, and that she'd like to have an afternoon there, and so he's hired a motor launch. He's—he's *wax* in her hands."

She heaved a deep sigh and went downstairs again with an expression of settled melancholy on her face. The case was, of course, too desperate even for an anonymous letter of appreciation.

The telephone bell rang as Euphemia was passing the hall on her way to the kitchen. The deep thrilling voice that she now knew so well demanded to be put through to the author's study.

"He said he wasn't to be disturbed," said Euphemia. "He's engaged. Will you leave a message?"

"Tell him that I can't come out with him this afternoon. I've got a piece of work that must be finished by tonight. . . . Tell him to ring me up as soon as he's free, will you?"

"Yes," said Euphemia.

She went very slowly upstairs and sat down in her little room, staring in front of her, a mischievous smile on her large mouth, as the outrageous idea that had once come to her in a flash of inspiration took definite form and shape in her mind.

Why not? she thought. They would both be happy. They were both fools but quite nice fools, especially Miss Pearson, and, after all, why should not fools be happy as well as other people? They had not made themselves fools. They had been born fools. It would rescue Miss Pearson from her sister, anyway. Some people can only give, and some people can only take. The takers and givers should be paired off together. It was the one satisfactory solution of the problem. It was as great a tragedy when two givers were together as when two takers were together. Life seemed to arrange that a taker should have a giver. They gravitated naturally together. Mrs. Lancaster had her Miss Greeves. Miss Pearson's sister had Miss Pearson. Adrian Host was a taker. He needed a giver. Miss Pearson's sister was, of course, a taker, too, but Euphemia grudged Miss

Pearson to her sister. She would be far happier with Adrian Host.

Just as she had reached this conclusion there came a knock at the door, and Adrian Host himself entered. He looked worried and uncomfortable. His eyes avoided hers and fixed themselves on the window.

"Oh . . . I shall be away for next week-end, Miss Tracy," he said distantly but uneasily. "I'm not sure when I shall be back. Towards the end of the week after, perhaps. I'm not quite sure of my address, so you need not forward anything."

"Miss Durrant rang you up this morning and left a message," said Euphemia.

His fair skin flushed. He looked so startled and guilty that it was all Euphemia could do not to laugh.

"Well?" he said, with an unconvincing attempt at non-chalance.

"She can't go on the river with you this afternoon," said Euphemia.

"Oh . . ."

He was obviously relieved

Euphemia fastened a steady gaze upon him and said slowly:

"Why don't you take Miss Pearson instead?"

He started, and an expression of horror flashed into his face, as he summoned the vision of Miss Pearson's atrociously dressed figure.

"I'm afraid——" he began hastily, but Euphemia cut him short.

"She's been looking very tired lately," she said. "It would do her all the good in the world. It would give her a treat that she'd remember all her life."

He hesitated. The picture was an enticing one. The famous author taking his tired little badly dressed secretary out for a day's pleasure—a day that she would remember all her life. It was the sort of thing that the heroes of his books did regularly. It was eminently *his* sort of thing. . . But still—he thought of Miss Pearson again and shuddered. Real life was different. He put himself in the

place of the onlookers, the people who would see him on the river with Miss Pearson, and shuddered again. They wouldn't understand. . . In books, of course, it didn't matter what onlookers thought. In real life somehow it did.

"I'm afraid——" he began again.

Again Euphemia cut him short.

"She admires your work so much."

He had looked upon the little secretary's silence as the silence of indifference or disapproval. Like a great light breaking in on him came the possibility that the silence might be the silence of appreciation, even of adoration. Perhaps the girl wasn't stupid, after all. . . . He remembered the day of the interview. She had turned up every passage he had referred to at once without hesitation or mistake. The smile that was nervous, uneasy, and complacent touched the corners of his finely moulded lips. . . . The afternoon took on a wholly different aspect. He felt suddenly as eager as he felt on receiving a review of his work that he knew beforehand to be eulogistic. An afternoon on the river with a quiet, shy, adoring girl who admired his work, who would remember the day for the rest of her life. . . . It helped to shut out the disturbing thought of Elissa Durrant's compelling eyes and that imminent visit to Paris. (He mustn't be narrow-minded. As Elissa said, he must drink deep of every experience life offered him. His work would profit by it. Still, the fact remained that the people in his books didn't drink deep of that sort of experience, and he wasn't sure that he wanted them to.)

"I'll tell her, shall I?" said Euphemia, speaking very firmly.

She had seen his hesitation and was afraid that the actual sight of Miss Pearson in the badly fitting blue serge dress might make him finally decide against her.

"What time were you going to start?"

"Er—two o'clock," he said, somewhat bewildered by the pace with which Euphemia was hustling the situation.

"I'll tell her to be ready," said Euphemia.

He found himself outside the door. He started back to the room to tell her that he could not possibly take Miss

Pearson, then he sighed and went slowly downstairs. There was a curious finality about the arrangements this woman made. One felt that they were settled, irrevocable. It was rather a relief, too, in a way. It took the responsibility so entirely out of one's hands.

Miss Pearson came to Euphemia's room at the end of the morning in answer to Euphemia's message.

"Miss Durrant can't go on the river with Mr. Host this afternoon," said Euphemia calmly. "Mr. Host wants you to go instead."

The horror on Miss Pearson's face almost equalled the horror that her employer's had shown at the suggestion.

"Me!"

"Yes."

"I couldn't. I couldn't. I couldn't possibly."

"Why not?"

Miss Pearson threw out her arms in a dramatic gesture.

"Look at me. How could I? How could I go out with him?"

"He wants you to."

"He doesn't. He can't. He can't possibly. . . . It would be *terrible*. I can never say a *word* to him. And *look* at me! How could a man like that be *seen* with me?"

"I've rung up your sister," said Euphemia, "and told her that you're being kept here this afternoon and can't come home. You must be ready to go with him by two. I've ordered your lunch up here so that you'll have time to get ready."

"I can't," pleaded Miss Pearson almost hysterically. "You must see that I can't. In this dress, too. I've got my saxe blue at home, but even that -- No, it's impossible. I couldn't. I keep telling you I couldn't."

"Come with me as soon as you've finished lunch," said Euphemia.

Miss Pearson made a hasty meal, then, still protesting, followed Euphemia into Imogen's bedroom. Euphemia flung open the wardrobe door and took down a chiffon dress printed in colours of blue and rust.

"This will fit you, I think," she said. Opening a

drawer, she flung out a satin slip and a pair of pale silk stockings. From a cupboard she took a pair of dainty shoes. "You needn't worry. They all belong to me. Fortunately you're about the same height as Miss Host. Same size of shoes and gloves. . . She used to wear this hat with it. Hurry up . . . You're supposed to be starting at two o'clock. . . . Put them on, and I'll be back in a minute."

She left Miss Pearson staring in stupefied amazement at the clothes Euphemia had thrown at her. When she returned, however, she had put on the dress and shoes and stockings. Euphemia carried the little pot of rouge that Miss Cliffe had given her, but that she had never used.

"Stand quite still," she ordered, and drew the little pad lightly across the girl's cheek-bones towards the ears, softening away the edges.

The girl's expression reminded her of her own horror and bewilderment on that shopping expedition with Miss Cliffe that now seemed like a distant dream, and she smiled at the memory.

"Now powder," she said. "She's left heaps behind her. . . . And here's a lipstick. . . . Now the hat. . . . No, no . . . let me do it. . . . Over your forehead like this. . . . There!"

She stood aside to inspect the result. The result was charming. The well-cut dress made the thin figure look slender and girlish. The shade of the big hat hid the slight protrusion of the eyes and emphasised their blueness. The soft flush on the cheeks completed the effect. It wasn't Miss Pearson at all. It was a young and pretty girl. But the voice was still Miss Pearson's. It came now, tense and anguished.

"I can't. I keep telling you I can't. What will he *think* when he sees me in his daughter's clothes?"

"He won't know they're his daughter's clothes, you little idiot. He doesn't *see* clothes. Men never do see clothes. He'll just see that you look pretty and young and charming, and he'll wonder where his eyes have been all these years."

"It's wicked," moaned Miss Pearson. "It's untruthful.

It's not straightforward. I shall never respect myself again."

"Don't be so selfish," said Euphemia.

"Selfish!" echoed Miss Pearson, stung by the word.

"Yes. Think of him instead of yourself. Respect yourself indeed! Who wants you to respect yourself? It's other people you ought to respect. Do you want the poor man to have a lonely afternoon? Do you want him to sit just waiting for Miss Durrant to ring him up? Stand here and look at yourself for two minutes. And then you can tell me whether you'll go through with it or not, and, if you decide not to, I won't worry you any more."

Miss Pearson stood and looked at her reflection in the cheval glass. She gazed at first with a sort of incredulous horror, then gradually both horror and incredulity vanished. The slim figure drew itself up, settled down into itself, as it were, began to preen itself. The reddened lips smiled slightly. The blue eyes grew brighter.

"Well?" said Euphemia.

"Yes," said Miss Pearson, and even her voice seemed to have changed, to have grown poised and calm and musical.

"Yes. I'll go through with it."

"Talk to him about his work," whispered Euphemia as they went downstairs, "talk to him about his work all the time. Tell him how much you like it."

The author was waiting in the hall. He looked bored and listless and resentful. He had decided that Miss Tracy must be shown quite firmly that his private affairs were not her concern. He could not think even now what had made him consent to take Miss Pearson out for the afternoon. The very prospect of it sent him hot and cold. He'd given his word, but—he glanced at the staircase. Miss Tracy was coming downstairs with a pretty, charmingly dressed girl. He drew himself up and surreptitiously straightened his tie. Then—he gave a slight but audible gasp. It was Miss Pearson. He stepped forward with his most delightful smile.

"How good of you to give up your afternoon," he said. "This is absolutely *splendid*. Are you quite ready?"

With his most courtly air he handed her to the waiting car. As Euphemia had prophesied, he did not recognise his daughter's clothes.

Miss Pearson came back in the evening to collect her attaché case. She slipped up to Euphemia's room, but could give no adequate account of the afternoon.

"It was heavenly," she said, "heavenly. I can't believe it was real. Every *minute* of it was heavenly. I shall never forget a single *second* of it as long as I live. He was simply *marvellous*! I thought he was more wonderful than any other man in the world, but he's even more wonderful than that."

"What did you talk about?" said Euphemia.

"Oh, his work chiefly. He talked simply *beautifully* about it."

Euphemia took a small suit-case from the corner of the room.

"You must take this home," she said firmly. "There's a jumper suit that you must wear here every morning and some other clothes—shoes and stockings and some felt hats. Now don't make a fuss. Miss Host gave them to me, and I give them to you."

The glow had faded from Miss Pearson's face, and the familiar look of apprehension had returned to it.

"Oh, but my sister," she gasped. "She'll be *furious* about it all. She's got such terribly high ideals."

"Tell your sister to mind her own business," said Euphemia curtly.

Dazed, bewildered, ecstatic, apprehensive, the little secretary set off home with her finery.

Euphemia went down to the study on the excuse of asking Mr. Host if he would like some tea.

He looked larger somehow than he had looked that morning. Larger and more upright. His air of furtive anxiety had left him. Sleek, happy, almost purring. There was a faint flush of excitement on his pale cheeks.

"No, thank you, Tracy," he said, "no tea. We had tea out. To a student of human nature like myself, Tracy," he

continued expansively, "it's a strange thing that we can live in the same house with people and not know them at all. Then, quite suddenly, a few hours together in, say, a different environment, and one sees them as they are, as one has never seen them before. And it's a still more curious thing how a perfect friendship can leap to birth full grown where one would not before have thought it possible."

"Yes," said Euphemia. "I was wondering if there was any day soon when you were going out, because I'd like to get this chimney swept and the room well cleaned."

"I shall be out tomorrow morning," said the author.

"They can do it tomorrow then," said Euphemia. "Miss Pearson can work in the dining-room, I suppose."

Again the faint flush crept into the author's cheeks.

"Miss Pearson will be out too," he said. "There are—er—there are several references to country life in my next book that I wish to verify, and so I'm taking Miss Pearson out into the country for the day in order to—er—get several points clear." He was like a schoolboy in his self-consciousness. "I've ordered the car, in fact, for ten o'clock and will probably not be in till dinner time."

"Of course," said Euphemia thoughtfully, "I could get the chimney done when you're away."

"Away?"

"Yes. Next week-end."

"Oh . . . er . . . I shan't be going away next week-end, after all. My work will keep me at home, I find. Oh, and, Tracy," as she turned to go, "I'm rather busy to-night. If Miss Durrant should ring up, don't put her through to me. Tell her I'm too busy to be disturbed."

Euphemia went up to her bedroom and looked at the geranium that flourished gaily in its little pot on the window-sill.

"You and I," she said to it with her rich deep chuckle, "will soon have to be looking out for a fresh job, my dear."

XXVI

EUPHEMIA was back again in the Belgravia Ladies' Residential Club. Miss Cliffe was alert and cheerful, but it was a make-believe alertness and cheerfulness. It no longer communicated itself to the whole house. In the old days the curtains had seemed to grow less faded, the paint less worn, the furniture less shabby at the sight of that short stout figure, at the sound of the brisk resonant voice.

"Things have just got beyond me, that's all," she explained to Euphemia. "Yes, I've quite got over that woman. Your sleeping in her room makes a lot of difference, of course, but the place began to go down then, and it's never picked up. I've lost all my pride and interest in it."

Euphemia had felt no nervousness in Miss Furmore's bedroom, and slept there soundly every night. The geranium on the window-sill had made the room at once normal and wholesome and friendly. In a place of honour on the mantelpiece stood the signed photograph that had been her parting present from Mr. Host. The wedding had been an impressive ceremony, and the bride had looked charming. The bride's two little nieces had carried the train, and the bride's sister had wept throughout the service. Despite her tears she approved of the match. ("I can't tell you how I shall miss her. I've done everything for her ever since our mother died. . . . He's a lucky man, but he's worthy of her. She's always admired his work, and he's always depended upon her judgment. Oh, I've seen this coming for years.")

"Brian behaved abominably in church," said Elaine to

Euphemia at the reception. "I was thoroughly ashamed of him."

"You were as bad," said Brian.

"Yes, but you made me," said Elaine. "I'd never have giggled if you hadn't started."

"It was the thought of the old man falling for Pop-eyes that kept coming over me," said Brian. "After all, it's one of the funniest things that have ever happened since the world began. Now confess, Tracy, that you simply held your sides in your den as you watched the little affair running its course. Oh, why did I marry Elaine before it came off? It would have been heavenly to watch. . . . Personally I'd put my shirt on Elissa. I never thought Pop-eyes had the spunk."

"Isn't he vulgar?" said Elaine with a placid, almost matronly little smile. "It's dreadful for a nice refined girl to have to live with him."

He grinned. "Yes, but no nice refined girl has to live with me, so it's all right. . . . However, to return to the mystery. Pop-eyes looks almost pretty today, and the old man's as keen as nuts. Watch the way he's looking at her. Or is he just doing his stuff for the party?"

"Oh no, he's keen all right," said Elaine wisely. "I can tell."

"How can you tell?" teased Brian. "I say, Tracy," he went on, smiling at his wife, "doesn't she look adorable? Have you ever seen anyone look more adorable?" *

"Are you talking about Pop-eyes?" said Elaine.

"No, idiot. You."

"Well, you know perfectly well that I'm looking so dreadful that I nearly didn't come, because I'm sure that everyone must notice."

"I hope they will," said Brian. "Let's tell Tracy. Tracy, you may begin to knit things any time you like now."

"Brian!" said Elaine, "Don't shout like that. Everyone will hear."

"I want them to," said Brian. "In five minutes I'm going to get up onto a chair and announce it to the room."

"I'll kill you if you tell anyone else."

"Take me home, then. I'm sick of this beastly crowd. I want to get home and catch some more slugs. Tracy, I'm the world's greatest slug hunter. Seventy was my bag last night. And as for my tomatoes, they have to be seen to be believed. I've raised them by hand from the cradle. I say, Tracy, I've dared myself to kiss Pop-eyes when I say good-bye, and I'm going to do it now. Come along, Elaine, be brave and kiss Pop-eyes with me."

"If you tell Pop-eyes ——" breathed Elaine.

"I shan't," he said. "I shouldn't dream of doing. She'd make it things that fitted the wrong places."

"Oh, come along home," said Elaine, dragging him to where the bride and bridegroom still held court at the further end of the room. Mrs. Host, flushed, bright-eyed, radiantly happy, looked almost beautiful. She received Brian's kiss with intense gratification, murmured something about hoping that he'd look upon her as a sister, and then was overcome by emotion. Adrian Host seized his son's hand in a prolonged clasp, acutely sensible of the touching picture that they made—Father and Son, both tall and handsome, though Brian's chestnut mop topped his grey, carefully groomed head by several inches.

"My boy!" he said in a voice that quivered with emotion, still smiling his charming smile. He tried to see Brian's mother hovering over them, uniting the three of them as it were, but the picture refused to become vivid. He hoped, however, that the onlookers were seeing it. Perhaps some of them could remember Brian's mother better than he could. . . . He drew his son to him and kissed him.

"Come and see us often, my boy, won't you," he said. "My house is still your home, you know."

He considered that the onlookers need not have turned away from the affecting little scene. Tact, of course, but misplaced tact. There was nothing to be ashamed of in watching a simple and sincere expression of fatherly love.

Brian followed his wife out of the room, his chestnut head held high, his blue eyes dancing.

Euphemia had had a letter from Imogen the day before.

"How heavenly about Papa and Pop-eyes. Did she catch

him on the rebound from Brains? . . . Anyway, I'm sure she'll cherish him and take him seriously, which is all the poor old dear wants. She couldn't see through a piece of glass, so she'll never see through father. I've had rather a pathetic letter from her asking my forgiveness for her presumption and saying that she really 'understands' him. . . . Heaven help her if she ever does. Still, I wish the old pet no harm, though he's been useless as a parent, and I hope they'll be awfully happy. Go and see them occasionally, Tracy, and help to keep the wool pulled over her eyes. What are you going to do? You ought to come out here. It's like coming from Hell to Heaven to come from London here. Do you remember I told you that I felt as if I was being given another life. I still feel like that. I wish I could tell you what an angel Peter is. He's the sort of man whom one dreams of marrying in one's teens and then later decides doesn't exist. You can't possibly understand, because you don't know him. . . . You'd laugh to see us getting up at six o'clock and working quite hard all day. I adore it. . . . I'm running the dairy all by myself *and* making a flower garden, as well as doing the housekeeping and most of the cooking and making my own clothes. It's all the greatest fun. It's a shame that Pop-eyes has done you out of a job. Do tell me what you're going to do."

Sitting in Miss Furmore's bedroom, knitting a tiny woollen coatee for Elaine's expected baby, Euphemia, too, wondered what she was going to do. She had decided not to take another situation as housekeeper. The thought of a shop still attracted her. She had saved the greater part of her salary while she was with Adrian Host, and he had given her a cheque for £50 when she left him. She had decided that the idea of a fruit or flower stall by the roadside was impracticable. But a little shop . . . she had enough money to pay the rent of one for two years, and after that it would pay its own rent. People coming and going . . . work . . . freedom. . . . Her unconquerable zest for life pulsed warmly through her body as she thought of it. . . . A shop . . . living human contacts . . . children, their heads just reaching the counter, pushing their pennies over it with

small grimy hands. . . . Women, their babies in their arms, talking to her, gossiping, confiding. It must be a "common" neighbourhood, somewhere where people were real. She would have the purple dress with flounces and lace collar for "best." She would go to church in it on Sundays. No more sitting in dull little rooms, wearing dull clothes, mending other people's stockings, arranging other people's meals. She had not yet dared to tell Miss Cliffe of her plans. She must tell her soon, of course. . . .

The door opened suddenly, and Miss Cliffe entered.

"Well," said Miss Cliffe, sinking down into a chair with a sigh of weariness, "things going all right?"

She glanced round the room and added meditatively, "Funny how your being here has seemed to change this room. It isn't as if it's made one forget. It's somehow as if it's made it not have happened at all. By the way, Dr. Marriott's coming to dinner with Mrs. Lancaster tonight. He's taken a small place in Scotland for a holiday, and she's going to look after it for him. Oh, one can see *that* coming."

A curious wave of depression had swept over Euphemia. Quite suddenly the little shop and even the purple dress had lost their glamour. They didn't matter . . . nothing mattered.

"Oh yes," went on Miss Cliffe. "I suppose they'll come back engaged and be married almost immediately. Strange what a lot of these middle-aged marriages there have been lately. Look at your Mr. Host. But, of course, he's married a young girl. . . . After all, you know, there's something rather romantic in a man of Dr. Marriott's age marrying his old sweetheart, isn't there? She's a fool, but I've come to the conclusion that men prefer fools, and if they prefer them why not let them have them? . . . Anyway, I'll be glad to be rid of her. Though it will probably be the last straw as far as the place is concerned."

Euphemia set her teeth. Chatter, chatter, chatter. . . . Why didn't the woman go? Then she pulled herself up. She mustn't let herself get nervy just because. . . .

"You'll like to see the doctor again," went on Miss

Cliffe. "He attended you when your foot was bad, didn't he?"

"I don't think I shall come down," said Euphemia, speaking slowly and steadily. "Do you mind if I have my dinner sent up here? I want to get on with the little coat and send it off tomorrow."

"Yes, that's all right," said Miss Cliffe casually. "I'll tell Hannah. . . . I'd better go to see to things now."

When she had gone, Euphemia laid down her work and stared in front of her. A passionate self-contempt possessed her. "Coward," she said fiercely. "Why didn't you go down? . . ." "Because I want to finish the coat. It's such a waste of time going down to dinner." . . . "You don't want to finish it. There's no hurry for it at all." . . . "I hate to see any woman getting hold of a man as she's getting hold of him." . . . "That's not the reason. You know that that isn't the reason. I'll tell you the reason. . . ."

She went slowly to the mirror and made herself look at her reflection as a stranger might look at it, noting remorselessly its clumsiness, its middle-age, its general unattractiveness. She addressed herself scornfully. "Blousy," she said with a sort of relish, as if the word afforded her a peculiar satisfaction. "Blousy, that's what you are. Common, too. Blousy and common. I knew you were that, of course, but I didn't know you were a sentimental fool as well. Now I know, I can be on my guard. . . . You want keeping down, you do. Blousy . . . Blousy and common. . . ."

She tried to fight off her depression, and to fix her thoughts on the little shop, but the little shop seemed to fade away into nothing. For the first time in her life, she felt afraid.

There was a sharp knock at her door, and Miss Cliffe came in again. She carried a sheaf of letters. Her pale face was blotched with curious patches of red. She sat down on the bed panting, her hand on her heart.

"I thought I'd tell you first," she said in a harsh, breathless voice. "The end's come."

"What do you mean?" said Euphemia.

"Bellews say that if they're not paid by the end of

the week they're going to issue a writ. That means the end."

"Bellews?"

"The grocers. They've bought Foley's. Old Foley would never have done it, of course. Well, the bank won't lend me a penny more. I'm overdrawn hopelessly as it is. . . . It's the end, that's all. I'd meant to give it up and get out of it as soon as I could, but I'd never thought of it ending this way. Disgraced."

A spasm of trembling shook her.

"I can't face it," she said. "I've held my head high all my life. I can't face it. I've come to the end. . . . Miss Furmore had more sense than I realised at the time."

"Don't be a fool," said Euphemia sharply. "How much do you owe?"

"It's more than I can get from anywhere. It's over fifty pounds."

Euphemia was silent for a few moments, then said:

"I can let you have it."

"You?" said Miss Cliffe.

"Yes, I've got it. You're welcome to it."

Miss Cliffe's eyes filled suddenly with tears.

"I don't know how to thank you," she said. "I simply don't. . . . I'd pull myself together and start afresh if I could start clear of debt. . . . I oughtn't to take it from you, I know, but well, I'm past all that. The disgrace of going bankrupt would kill me. I can't possibly tell you how grateful I am to you, Euphemia."

"Don't be grateful," said Euphemia briskly. "We ought just to take for granted that other people will help us and that we'll help other people. And then forget all about it. Gratitude's an overrated virtue. I always feel that there's something stingy about it."

"What nonsense, Euphemia! I shall always feel grateful to you. And, of course, I shall pay it back the minute I get the place on its feet again. . . ." She put her handkerchief to her eyes. "I wish I could stop crying. It's the relief. . . . Euphemia, do go down and start the carving for me."

I can't let people see me like this. I'll be all right in a minute, then I'll come down and take it over."

Euphemia went slowly down the stairs. Mrs. Lancaster was just in front of her. In the hall the housemaid was opening the door to admit Dr. Marriott. Euphemia tried to slip past them, but Dr. Marriott greeted Mrs. Lancaster hastily, then turned to Euphemia.

"I hoped I'd see you, Miss Tracy. I want to ask a favour of you. You've left Mr. Host, haven't you?"

"Yes."

"I wonder - if you haven't heard of anything else——"

"I haven't."

"It's a patient of mine. She's neurasthenic. She's gone away for a change to a hotel on the South Downs - a house called Greylands, where friends of hers used to live before it was turned into a hotel - and I want her to have someone with her, partly for her husband's sake. She wears him out. He's the sort of man who lends himself to being worn out. Somehow I could only think of you. It will do her good just to be with you, and you're too sane to be worried or offended by her. I know I'm asking a favour. Don't do it if you really don't want to."

Euphemia was looking at him, but she did not see him. She saw only herself and Mrs. Lancaster standing side by side.

"Will you come?" he said.

She was silent for a few moments. She had not enough money to start the little shop now, even if the glamour had not faded from it. That odd feeling of weariness was still upon her.

"Yes," she said slowly. "I suppose I might as well do that as anything."

XXVII

THE man who was waiting for Euphemia on the platform was small and neat and stooping. His smile as he approached her made her think of a nice dog that has not been well treated and is never quite sure how it is going to be received.

"It - it is Miss Tracy, isn't it?" he said. "Yes, yes, I thought so. This way, Miss Tracy. Quite an easy journey from town, isn't it? The hotel is some distance from the station, I'm afraid, but I have a taxi waiting. We shall soon be there now. Quite soon. Quite soon now."

His anxious, reassuring tone of voice gave the impression of having become so habitual that he used it whether there were need for anxiety and reassurance or not. One could imagine his giving an order to a waiter in just that tone.

"How's Mrs. Featherstone?" said Euphemia.

The little man's smile clouded over.

"So-so. Very so-so. Up and down, you know. Up and down. Mercurial. Very mercurial. Highly strung and super-sensitive. Of course, ordinary people like you and me have no idea of how exquisitely these delicate, highly strung organisms suffer. I'm sure you'll be a great help to her. A very great help."

Euphemia saw a small boy creeping near her for comfort.

"Don't worry about her," she said smiling. "She'll soon be all right, you know. It's just a question of time."

He brightened.

"Yes," he said. "I'm sure you're right. Quite sure you're right. I'm very glad you've come. Dr. Marriott said that

you would be a great help to us both, and I'm sure he was right. Quite sure he was right."

Greylands was on the highest point of the downs. The taxi drove in at the gates, up the drive, past a large neglected garden and a lawn badly in need of cutting, on which forgathered in apparent amity a horse, a peacock, and a large family of rabbits, and stopped in front of a spacious eighteenth-century house.

"It used to be a country house, of course," said Mr. Featherstone in a voice that apologised for it, himself, and the whole world. "The air is the best in England for nerves, and my wife stayed here as a child and so has a sentimental attachment to the place, but I'm afraid that it's not well run. Not well run, at all."

Several people were in the entrance hall. Euphemia noticed a pretty girl in a bath-chair, by which stood a dapper little man with a grey moustache and humorous eyes. An untidy middle-aged woman wearing a pink cotton jumper, on a fold of which had collected a thick deposit of cigarette ash, stood leaning against the newel post of the staircase, gazing in front of her, her hands in the pockets of her skirt, a cigarette hanging out of the corner of her mouth. A smartly dressed woman and girl (obviously mother and daughter) were just setting off from the front door. They threw glances of well-bred indifference at Euphemia as they passed her.

Euphemia followed Mr. Featherstone up the stairs to a sitting-room on the first floor. "Miss Tracy, my dear," he said in his hesitating, propitiatory way as he opened the door. Then he hovered in the doorway, ready to obliterate himself, or interpose himself, whichever should be necessary.

Mrs. Featherstone, a thin, well-dressed woman of medium height, obviously much younger than her husband, with pronounced features and hard, bright restless eyes, came forward to greet Euphemia and at once began to talk in a way that seemed to employ every muscle and nerve of her body, gesticulating freely, and laughing a high-pitched, unsteady laugh. Her husband hovered in the doorway for

some moments, then crept away, closing the door noiselessly behind him. Mrs. Featherstone continued to talk, describing in detail her nervous symptoms, the progress of her illness, her character, her family history. . . . There was a strained intensity about her every look and movement, and after half an hour Euphemia began to be conscious of a feeling of exhaustion that she had never known before.

She was relieved when a loud and rather tinny bell sounded through the house.

"That's tea," said Mrs. Featherstone. "Sometimes I have it up here and sometimes I go down for it. I think that today I must take you down to it to introduce you to the others . . . all rather ordinary people, I'm afraid." She flashed upon Euphemia a smile in which resignation and superiority were mingled. "Perhaps you'd like to go to your room before tea, would you? It's the next one to this."

On her return Euphemia found Mr. Featherstone hovering outside the sitting-room door. He approached her in a conspiratorial fashion.

"How does she seem to you?" he said.

"She's very bright," said Euphemia.

He shook his head.

"It's one of her better days," he said. "She'll pay for it later. She's too highly strung, you know. She lives on her nerves. . . . I - I'm glad you've come, I'm sure. You're going to be a great help, a very great help."

The door opened suddenly and Mrs. Featherstone appeared. She threw her husband a smile of barbed sweetness.

"Herbert, darling," she said, "if ever you suffer from nerves, I promise you that I won't whisper outside your door. There's nothing in the whole world more irritating."

"I'm sorry, my dear," he said. "Are you going down to tea today?"

"Yes, I want to introduce Miss Tracy to our delightful fellow-guests."

He looked faintly unhappy at the sneer in her voice.

"They're quite nice people," he said to Euphemia. "Kind,

you know, and good-hearted. 'They'll do all they can to make you feel at home.'

"Then I hope they won't succeed," said his wife, her vivacity edged with exasperation, "because, if Miss Tracy feels at home with them, she's hardly likely to feel at home with me, and already I'm beginning to rely on Miss Tracy. I think that she and I are really going to understand each other."

The over-bright smile that never touched the staring eyes was flashed upon Euphemia. Mr. Featherstone hung about at the top of the stairs as if ready to follow them, if his wife should want him, but glad to escape, if she didn't. She did not turn round, and he departed with something of relief in his thin, tired face.

The drawing-room was a sunny, pleasant room with French windows opening on to the lawn. There was a tea-table, covered with cups and saucers, and a cake-stand with plates of bread and butter and cake. A large number of people stood about, discussing the general unsatisfactoriness of the establishment, and Euphemia was conscious at once of a warm, friendly, confidential atmosphere. She realised, not for the first time, that nothing draws people together in such a close bond of amity as a common grievance. These people had always something to talk about besides the weather and the books they were reading.

"It would break the Calthrops' heart to see it now," said Mrs. Featherstone in a penetrating voice.

There was a slight movement in the company as those who had heard of the Calthrops *ad nauseam* drew away and those who had not drew nearer. A small court formed itself around Mrs. Featherstone, and she began to talk with strained animation, describing the house as it had been when the Calthrops lived there, flashing her over-bright smile around the circle continually as she talked.

The untidy woman whom Euphemia had noticed in the hall stood leaning against the mantelpiece, staring absently in front of her. A cigarette still hung out of the corner of her mouth, and there was still the dusting of cigarette ash on the ridge of her badly fitting pink cotton

jumper. Everyone greeted her on entering, and she replied cheerfully, in a slow deep drawl, freely besprinkling her conversation with oaths.

A boy and little girl came in by the garden door, poured out cups of tea, put them with some cake and bread and butter on a tray, and went out into the garden again. Leaning forward, Euphemia could see them carry the tray across the lawn to a woman who sat on a deck chair under a tree, and, sitting on the grass at her feet, spread out the tea picnic-fashion between them.

Then the pretty invalid appeared suddenly at the French windows, her invalid chair pushed by the short man who had been with her in the hall, and there was a general stir of welcome.

"Hello, Mrs. Lattimer, how goes it?"

"Hello, Lattimer!"

"Hello, hello, hello!" replied the man, wheeling the chair into the room through the French window. "God bless our happy home. Don't say there's any tea left. The shock would be too great. . . . Come on, Mother. They've left you a drop of tea. 'The cup that cheers but not inebriates.' Personally I prefer a cup to do both. I don't believe in half measures."

"Stop chattering, Father," smiled his wife, "and get something to eat."

"Well, I'd better. Probably we shan't get dinner till tomorrow breakfast time. You never know in this house, do you? . . . 'They would frequently breakfast at five o'clock tea and have dinner the following day.' Well, Miss Connington," he addressed the woman by the fireplace. "Everything going well with our little ray of sunshine?"

"Not a damn thing ever has gone well with me since I was born," she said in her slow drawl. "I should die of surprise if it ever did."

"That's the spirit that built the Empire," he said. "Have some more tea, Mother. Or I should say 'water.' The colour seems to have worn off. . . ."

"Do stop chattering so, Father."

Mr. Featherstone came in and joined his wife, glancing

timidly from her to Euphemia as if anxious to see how they had got on together. His wife greeted him peevishly. Her circle had gradually diminished, till now it held only Euphemia and an old lady so deaf that, though she liked to be where people were talking, she had years ago abandoned the attempt to find out what they were talking about.

"Where have you been Herbert?"

"Just for a little walk, my dear," he said apologetically.

"I wish you wouldn't go off like this. There have been such a lot of little things I've wanted you to do for me. . . ."

"I'm sorry, my dear," he said with a slightly bewildered air and continued in a doubting, tentative voice that, together with the way he watched her, gave the impression that he was willing to retract anything he said at the slightest sign from her. "By the way, I was going up to London to the meeting of the Hellenic Society to-morrow, you know. Only, of course, if you can spare me."

She became more gracious.

"Oh yes," she said, "that will be quite all right." Then turning to Euphemia, and raising her voice slightly, she added, "Herbert belongs to the Hellenic Society and the Royal Geographical Society, and he goes up to London to their meetings occasionally. . . . I'm too ill for anything of that sort, of course, but I'm deeply interested. I often wish he could bring me back a more consecutive account of the meetings than he does."

"I'll do my best to-morrow, my dear," said her husband mildly.

A burst of laughter came from the group around the Lattimers.

Mrs. Featherstone had shuddered as the Lattimers entered and was pointedly ignoring them.

"What the Calthrops would say if they saw them here!" murmured his wife. "To me it's *desecration*."

"They're always very kind and friendly," said her husband deprecatingly, "and she suffers a good deal."

His wife drew herself up as if affronted.

"*Suffers!*" she said. "She doesn't know the *meaning* of the word."

There was a sudden silence as a tall, thick-set, middle-aged man with a weather-beaten face passed the open French window.

"That's Mr. Craig, the proprietor," said Mrs. Featherstone. "He's letting the place go to rack and ruin, and he merely snaps his fingers at you if you complain. I can't think why anyone stays here. What Mr. Calthrop would have said if he could see that man in charge here, exploiting invalids and presuming on the fact that it's the finest air in England——"

"Quite, quite, my dear," said her husband hastily.

XXVIII

IN the lounge after dinner Mrs. Featherstone joined the wife of an artist whose husband was making sketches in the neighbourhood and entered at once into an animated and confidential conversation in which Euphemia was not included.

Euphemia, withdrawing from its range, found herself next to Mrs. Lattimer's invalid chair. At close quarters she noticed something pinched about the pretty girlish face, something of endurance in the gentle blue eyes, and remembered Mr. Featherstone's saying, "She suffers a good deal." Mrs. Lattimer smiled pleasantly and at once began to talk to her.

"I wanted to know you the minute I saw you," she said, "and I made up my mind to get next you this evening if I could. I saw you at dinner looking round at us all as if you longed to know all about us."

"I always feel like that about people," said Euphemia.

"So do I," said the little woman, her bright friendly eyes roving round the room. "Look at Father! Isn't he being naughty!"

Euphemia looked across the room to where Mr. Lattimer was flirting openly with a middle-aged woman dressed in the extreme of youthfulness whom Euphemia had not noticed before. She was responding with obvious enjoyment.

"That's Miss French," said Mrs. Lattimer. "She comes here for a week every summer. She nurses her mother night and day all the rest of the year, and her mother's a dreadful old termagant. She's ridiculous, of course, but she was a

pretty little flirt when she was a girl, and I suppose she doesn't realise that she's got too old for it. She enjoys every minute of it. Father always plays up to her. . . ."

The dapper little man caught his wife's eye and waved his hand to her across the room.

"Cheerio, Mother," he called, "be good."

"How many children have you?" said Euphemia.

"None . . . you see, we'd wanted a large family, and we'd meant to have as many children as we could, and then I got rheumatic fever the week after our wedding, and it's left me like this. I shall never have a child now. I suppose it's silly to call each other father and mother, but we sometimes pretend that we've got lots of children, as we'd meant to have. . . ."

The smile was so unclouded that Euphemia could not offer sympathy. She looked across at the dapper little man. His unfailing facetiousness, his life-and-soul-of-the-party manner, would have irritated most women, but his wife watched him with radiant pride and love.

"He does so enjoy this holiday," she went on. "We have a poultry farm right in the country miles away from anywhere, and he's always so popular wherever he goes that it's a shame to think of him buried in the country like that with just me. . . . Of course, there's not much going on here, but we come here because the air does me good. It's such hard lines on him, you know, to have married me thinking me strong and then me turn out like this, but he says he'd have married me ten times over even if I'd been like this when we met, and"—the radiant smile broke out again—"I believe him."

Euphemia glanced round the room full of people. Disjointed parts of a pattern, meaningless because you couldn't see their backgrounds, didn't know what things had gone to their making, couldn't detect their real personalities from their false.

The chorus of complaint was still being kept up by a few determined spirits.

"Ten minutes between the soup and the fish. I timed it."

"And Mr. Craig reading his paper without turning a hair."

"I told him last night that I should go if things didn't improve."

The mother and daughter whom Euphemia had seen setting out for a walk when she arrived entered the room. Their faces were extraordinarily alike—sculptured, lovely, hard, wearing expressions of bored aloofness. They were more smartly dressed than anyone else in the hotel.

"That's Mrs. and Miss Longfield," whispered Mrs. Lattimer. "They're only here because it's cheap. They had a bad winter at Monte Carlo. Otherwise they'd have been staying in London." She lowered her voice confidentially. "They're the only ones I dislike. They look down on everyone so. It hasn't been half such fun since they came here. We used to have games in the evening. . . . In a place like this, far away from anywhere, people get so nice and friendly. But it's been different since they came."

"What do you do now in the evenings?" said Euphemia.

The pretty face clouded over.

"They've brought a horrible gambling game, and no one does anything else. I hate it. Look! They're getting it ready now."

The mother and daughter were setting out a game board on a table.

Their glances passed Euphemia by in dispassionate contempt as they looked round the room and called, "Anyone going to play?"

Everyone gathered round them. The artist—a tall, distinguished-looking man wearing a monocle—made himself master of the ceremonies.

"Faites vos jeux, mesdames et messieurs . . . faites vos jeux. . . ."

The little lead horses were set out, and coins were placed on the lines occupied by each. At first the company was noisy and jocular, but gradually silence fell. Mrs. Lattimer had refused to have her chair wheeled to the table, and her face wore a disconsolate expression.

"I don't see any *fun* in it," she whispered to Euphemia,

"and they keep it up till after midnight. Some of them lose quite a lot of money. Look at those children! It's a shame."

The two children were at the table with their mother. The boy looked bored and sulky, but the little girl sat, her figure rigid, her eyes gleaming in her thin pale face, as she watched the progress of the horses. She was more intent than anyone else on the game as she staked her small sums. The others laughed at her, lending her money when her own ran out, but her small set face never relaxed, her glittering eyes never left the board.

"I'd like to carry her up and put her to bed myself," said little Mrs. Lattimer. "She gets in a fever like this every night, and she thinks of nothing else. . . ."

The game went on till after twelve, and Euphemia noticed that a good deal of money changed hands. Mrs. and Miss Longfield, their arrogance thinly veiled by a suave and unremitting charm, kept things going. Mr. Featherstone stood watching the game, rubbing his hands together softly. Of all the players he saw only his wife, who was smiling with eager animation as she raked in her winnings.

"It's *quite* one of her better days!" he said happily to Euphemia.

Little Mrs. Lattimer watched them disconsolately.

"And we used to have such *fun*!" she said.

Euphemia's employer was as trying as Dr. Marriott had prophesied. On some days she was tensely vivacious and charming, on others silent and brooding. She was subject always, and apparently on no provocation, to fits of furious temper or sobbing despair. She vented her every mood on her husband. He was so intolerably on her nerves that even the sound of his gentle, deprecating voice in the distance made her wince, yet she was hurt and aggrieved if he left her for half an hour. Euphemia found the little man inexpressibly pathetic in his gentleness, his constant tenderness, his timid little apologies for his wife ("She suffers, you know, continually"), his gallant attempt to take the brunt of her moods upon himself and shield Euphemia. It made him at first desperately unhappy to see his wife

trying to bully Euphemia. He soon learnt, however, that it was impossible for anyone to bully Euphemia. She was placid, good-natured, imperturbable, like a nurse with a fractious child. She laughed at her charge, teased her, scolded her, and sometimes, in order to divert her mind from her imaginary grievances, told her stories from her beloved Malory and Chaucer.

"How *ridiculous!*" the patient would say. "Do tell me another one."

The garden of the hotel was neglected and overgrown. Mr. Craig's horse grazed regularly on the lawn and walked at will over the flower-beds. The rabbits were tame rabbits who lived in a hutch in the stables. No one was quite sure to whom they belonged, but everyone fed them, and as the hutch bars were broken they escaped into the garden several times a day. The gardener, an old man whose mental outlook on all sides was bounded by his "rhumatics," stayed away from work whenever he pleased.

Mr. Craig had returned to his town flat the week after Euphemia's arrival, leaving the place in charge of the cook—an erratic artist who cherished a bitter dislike of the guests in general, but had taken a fancy to Euphemia and welcomed her help in the kitchen when her patient was resting.

Euphemia learnt that Mr. Craig had inherited the place from his uncle, who had originally turned it into a hotel, and that he used it as an occasional country retreat, magnificently ignoring his "guests" and their complaints. They complained, of course, continually, but the tonic properties of the air were indisputable; the cooking was excellent, despite the fact that no meal was ever ready to time; there was a curiously compelling charm about the old house; and the grumblers seldom fulfilled their threats of going elsewhere.

The mother of the two children, Mrs. Bennett, was another sufferer from nerves. She had had to give up housekeeping, and now lived in boarding-houses and hotels, staying at one till she became bored or quarrelled with somebody, then moving on to another. There was a husband

in the background who lived in chambers in town and visited her as seldom as possible.

Neither she nor Mrs. Featherstone could bear not to be the centre of any group of which they formed part, and, after a violent but short-lived friendship, they now carefully avoided each other. Euphemia liked the boy. He was frank, unaffected, and friendly, though he laboured under a continual sense of grievance because of his homelessness.

"It's the limit," he said to Euphemia. "I'm sick of these beastly places. I'm sick of not having a home. I can't even keep an animal. . . And, even if I do get fond of a place, she's always moved on to somewhere else before the next holidays. . . ."

He lounged aimlessly about the garden, practised hitting tree trunks with stones, fraternised with the horse and the rabbits, and gloomily avoided all the guests except Euphemia. The little girl was delicate, highly strung, and already as nerve-ridden as her mother. She never went to bed before midnight and obviously lived in a state of unnatural excitement over the nightly gambling game.

The days gradually settled down into a quiet routine whose only diversions were the more glaring inadequacies of the "management" and the vagaries of Miss Connington, the daughter of a Norfolk squire, who had inherited from her father a colourful vocabulary, two hundred a year, and a complete ignorance of the value of money. Good-natured, hot-tempered, and eccentric, she was very popular with her fellow-guests.

Occasionally news from the outside world filtered through to the little community. Euphemia heard Denis Callander's new book, *The Experiences of a Cocaine Taker*, discussed with shocked enjoyment. ("Boots has banned it, my dear . . . but *do* read it if you can get hold of it. Of course, I wouldn't advise *anyone* to read it.") It was universally condemned but as universally read. About the same time Adrian Host's new novel was published. His wife sent a copy to Euphemia, and Euphemia set herself conscientiously to read it. The plot was slightly hackneyed. The charming hero married his secretary, who was plain and insignificant

in the opening chapters, but seemed mysteriously to acquire looks and charm as the book progressed. Miss French pronounced it "ever so sweet." "I simply *cried* where the daughter he'd *lived* for all those years marries and leaves him all alone. . . I think that a most *pathetic* bit where he's left standing alone on the quay when they've sailed."

XXIX

DR. MARRIOTT walked up from the station and entered the hotel by its side gate, in order to take a short cut through the kitchen garden. He glanced casually at a sturdy figure digging in the vegetable border, then stood staring at it in amazement.

Euphemia came over to him and wiped her heavy men's boots on her spade

"She's resting," she explained, "so I thought I'd dig over this patch. It's not been touched, and it's time the cabbage plants were put out. It'll be too late if it's left much longer. The gardener's not turned up again."

He looked at the hard overgrown earth she was working on.

"It's ridiculous!" he said with a touch of indignation in his voice. "It's a man's work. Why on earth should you do work that doesn't concern you?"

She laughed and pushed aside a strand of hair that was blowing across her eyes.

"I'm as strong as any man," she said, "stronger than most. And it concerns everyone that a good piece of land shouldn't be wasted. I'll have the plants in by the end of the week whether the old man comes back or not. He's work-shy, that's what's wrong with him."

It was his turn to laugh.

"Well, no one can say that about you," he said as he turned to go to the house.

Euphemia changed her gardening boots for large, serviceable ward shoes, took off her overall, and joined the doctor and her patient in the bedroom. He found the

patient much better and congratulated Euphemia on the change.

"I don't know how you treat her," he said, as they walked slowly back to the garden, "but however you treat her is the right way. I knew it would be. Do you find her very wearing?"

"I should sometimes if I was the sort that let myself be worn," smiled Euphemia. "I think of her as a child, and then it's all right."

"Don't get bored and run away before you must," he said, "because she's really better. . . You see," they sat down at the seat at the end of the lawn, "you see, she belongs to the class of nervous cases that is hardest to cure."

"Which is that?" said Euphemia, picking up a peacock's feather from the ground and smoothing it out with her large, gentle hands. "Everyone walks round the garden every morning picking up peacocks' feathers just like children picking up shells. I don't know what they do with them—but somehow you have to pick them up because they're so pretty. . . . Which is the class of nervous cases that is hardest to cure?"

The doctor leant back in his seat and crossed his legs.

"A nervous collapse caused by overwork is the easiest to cure. Then there are those that are caused by underwork—sheer boredom, you know—and those are more difficult. Then there are those whose minds have been warped by early conditions that perhaps they have forgotten though the effects remain. And those are the hardest to cure."

"Is Mrs. Featherstone one of those?"

"Yes. She was brought up by a stepmother who disliked her. The stepmother had children of her own whom she adored, but she was a conscientious woman and always put her stepchild first, giving her the largest share of everything. The child grew up having the first place in the little family in everything, but conscious always of her stepmother's dislike. And the lack of love—love itself, not just the things love gives—does strange things to children. It makes them grasping. Subconsciously they want to restore

the balance. They want to take, to get. . . A child who has not been loved in childhood turns into a woman who must be always in the limelight, a woman who craves for flattery and admiration, a woman who will stoop to any trick to make herself the centre of attention. She does it to restore the balance. You might say that she gives herself the love she has missed in her childhood—becoming self-centred, self-seeking, tyrannical, wearing out herself and those around her. She wants the power and importance that a loveless childhood denied her. In Mrs. Featherstone's case, as in so many, the harm was done while she was in the nursery. . . Something was warped in her then that can never perhaps be quite straightened." He stood up, smiling at her. "I hope I haven't bored you too much with all this."

"It isn't boring," said Euphemia.

"I must run to catch my train now. No, I don't want a taxi. I enjoy the walk. Good-bye, you're managing splendidly."

As he went away, he thought of her, not as she stood beneath the tree watching him go, but as he had seen her first that morning, turning over the hard earth with effortless strength, her boots mud-encrusted, her hair blown across her eyes, her large firm body moving rhythmically to the strokes of the spade. . . . Nothing had been quite the same since the day he had spent with her in the country. Some mysterious change had taken place in him. It had affected his attitude to his work. The weariness had gone, and he felt again the compassion and understanding and eagerness to help that he had felt in the early days of his practice. Even his short visit today had cheered and invigorated him.

Always when he was with her he was conscious of the warm, rich kindliness of her. He knew that one of the reasons why he had asked her to take this post was that he did not want to lose touch with her. How amazing it was, he thought, that a woman like that had not married. She was made to be a wife.

Euphemia sat on the garden seat where he had left her, staring in front of her. Her mouth was fixed in a set tight

smile, her big hands were clenched together on her lap. She had tried to deny love, but she realised suddenly that one cannot deny love without being the poorer for it. Love means sacrifice, always, everywhere. There is no love—no real love—without sacrifice. One must learn to love without wanting to possess. Laughing at herself wasn't the right way (though even now she could see herself in imagination as she sat there and know how ridiculous it was that she should be in love). Telling herself that it was wicked wasn't the right way. It wasn't ridiculous, and it wasn't wicked. . . She looked forward into her life, seeing it, not dark or empty because he could never return her love, but illumined with a warm inner light. Though she never saw him again, the love she had for him would enrich every other human relationship. Something of him would be in everyone she met, and something of the love she had for him would go out to them. Life could never be dark, never be empty, while people were near her, around her, within speech and touch and hearing. She looked back over the pathway of her life since the day she had left her father's cottage, and saw it peopled with forms, some clearer than others, some near, some far away. . . Miss Cliffe, Mrs. Lewes, Dolly, Hugh, Derek, Beatrice, Imogen, Elaine, Brian, Emily, Maggie, Adrian Host and his wife, Mrs. Lancaster, Miss Greeves, Miss French, Miss Connington, the Longfields, the Lattimers. . . She counted them over as a miser counts his gold. People . . . they were her riches. . . Her body relaxed and her lips curved into a smile. Suddenly she saw the figure of Mr. Featherstone entering the gate on his return from a meeting of the Royal Geographical Society. He walked up the drive slowly and wearily, his eyes on the ground. Then he saw her and came quickly across the lawn to her. There was a woebegone expression on his small lined face.

"Have you enjoyed your meeting?" said Euphemia cheerfully.

"Yes," he said in a flat, toneless voice, then with sudden startling vehemence, "Miss Tracy, I must tell you something. I'm a very wicked man."

"I don't think you can be that," she said with her large, reassuring smile.

"I am," he said. "I—I don't take any interest in these societies. I don't know what the lecturers are talking about, and if I did I shouldn't take any interest in it. I only belong to them—ever since I've known you I've wanted to confess to you—I only belong to these societies because they—it's a dreadful thing to have to confess to you—because they give me a day away from my wife occasionally. A sort of holiday. I'm so ashamed to confess it. You know, Miss Tracy, you must know, how much I love and admire my wife. She—she's far too good for me. But her nervous complaint and her extreme sensitiveness make her—well, just a little wearing—just occasionally, I mean. I oughtn't to find it so, I know. It's very wrong of me to find it so, but—well, the fact is that sometimes I feel the need of a day apart from her, and she'd never understand, of course. So—well, this is my way. She'd never want to come with me to the lectures because she finds lectures dull—as, of course, I do also, considered *as* lectures."

Euphemia tried to speak, but he silenced her by a gesture and continued, pouring out his words in a quick stream. "I know that I don't deserve such a wonderful woman for a wife, and it's my own unworthiness, I know, that makes me feel this need to get away from her at times. I couldn't go up to a theatre or anything like that, because—well, naturally she would be hurt by the idea that I wanted to go away from her to enjoy myself. Or she'd want to come with me, and then we should both suffer for the strain on her nerves. She doesn't mind these societies, because—well, she doesn't look on them as enjoyment. It's—oh, it's all so horribly deceitful. It worries me, and yet," he spread out his hands helplessly, "I must do it."

"Don't worry about it if you enjoy it," smiled Euphemia.

"I don't enjoy the actual lectures," said the little man earnestly. "I don't understand a word from beginning to end. I don't even listen. But—just to be able to sit for an hour knowing that—that no calls can possibly be made on me—it's wonderful, Miss Tracy. It is really. I enjoy

every moment of it. And yet—all the time I'm bitterly ashamed."

"Now listen to me," said Euphemia firmly. "You've nothing at all to be ashamed of."

He interrupted her with a gesture.

"You don't know the worst, Miss 'Tracy,'" he said fiercely. "You don't know the worst. I hardly dare face the worst myself. I've been tempted—I've actually been tempted. I've never actually succumbed, but I've been tempted——"

He paused.

"Well?"

He burst out fiercely.

"I've actually been tempted to go to the pictures or a theatre instead of to one of the lectures. I've never done it, but——"

"Now listen to me," said Euphemia again. "You've got to think of these outings of yours as something you do for your wife. They're services to her, just as much as if you were here waiting on her. *Listen*. Don't interrupt. You want to be at your best for her sake, to help to keep her cheerful, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Well, then, you can't be at your best unless you get right away from her sometimes, just to give yourself a change. It wouldn't be fair to her not to. That's the way you've got to look at it. She's not in a state to understand that, but you and I understand it, and you do it for her sake. Do you see?"

"Yes," said the little man, brightening visibly.

"And you must think of it this way, too——" went on Euphemia, but at that minute Mrs. Lattimer appeared in her bath-chair, propelled by her dapper, smiling husband.

"We were just looking for you, Miss Tracy," cried Mrs. Lattimer eagerly. "Don't go, Mr. Featherstone." But Mr. Featherstone, murmuring greetings and apologies, had set off towards the house with his slow, deprecating gait.

"We're going to give a party, Father and I," went on Mrs. Lattimer eagerly. "We're going to give it in our bed-

room. It's the largest in the house, you know, and perfect for a party. We're going to have a really jolly evening with games—the sort we used to have before the Longfields came. You'll come to it, won't you? We put down your name first of all. At first I meant to ask just the people we liked, then I thought that I wouldn't enjoy a moment of it if I thought anyone was feeling left out."

"That's Mother all over," put in her husband.

"Be quiet, Father. So I'm going to ask everyone, even the Longfields, just to be sure of hurting no one's feelings. I want it to be a really *jolly* party. It'll be heavenly to have an evening without that beastly gambling game. We've not had a bit of fun since they started it. . . ."

"Now, Mother, don't begin on that again."

"No, I won't. . . I wanted to ask you about the games, Miss Tracy. I wonder," wistfully, "if we could work them up to charades. Nothing's really such fun as charades. We'll begin with refreshments." She looked towards the house where Mr. Featherstone's small neat figure could be seen just entering the front door. "Poor little man," she said. "It'll do *him* good to have a jolly evening. I'll make a fuss of his wife and keep her in a good temper, so that he can enjoy it. I want to give that kid a real kid's time. . . . Now let's think out some charades ready for when we really get things going. . . ."

XXX

THE guests had assembled in the Lattimers' room for the party, and refreshments were being handed round—tea, coffee, whisky, sandwiches, biscuits, and cakes. Mrs. Lattimer had spent all morning making the sandwiches. She had thought and dreamed of little but the party for the last week. The room was decorated with flowers and strands of gaily coloured paper that stretched from the chandelier in the middle of the room to every available picture-hook. Chinese lanterns fluttered in the breeze on the balcony outside. Mr. Lattimer was going to light them after supper. Inside the room, gas-filled balloons were tied on to the chair-backs, and a pyramid of crackers stood on a side table. Everyone in the house had been invited. Mrs. Lattimer, flushed and glowing with happy excitement, was wheeled by her husband to and fro among her guests. She made much of Mrs. Featherstone, asking her questions about the house in the Calthrops' time, so that Mrs. Featherstone became pleasantly condescending, and Mr. Featherstone, though busy handing round refreshments, visibly relaxed. Euphemia had been working behind the scenes all day. It was Euphemia who had won over the cook—at first disposed to be hostile—to friendly co-operation. It was Euphemia who had made the cakes and helped Mr. Lattimer carry in the chairs and table.

The guests stood about, cheerful and vivacious, as if determined each to contribute his and her due share to the success of the evening. The sight of little Mrs. Lattimer radiantly happy in this fulfilment of her dream was a touching one. Even Miss Connington, leaning against the

mantelpiece with the usual cigarette drooping from her lips and the usual little heap of ash collected in the folds of her jumper, gazed at her hostess benignantly and murmured, "A sport, that's what you are, Mrs. Lattimer. A damn good little sport."

Miss French, wearing a youthful dress of pale blue net that emphasised cruelly the lines and sagging contours of her middle-aged face, was being arch and coquettish and making great play with the large eyes that had once been her best feature. So patently good-natured was she, so given up to innocent and whole-hearted enjoyment of this one short holiday in a hard working year, that the men followed Mr. Lattimer's example and flirted with her shamelessly.

Surrounded by a small court of them, she was giving an animated account of her afternoon's outing with Miss Connington. They had set out for a bicycle ride, but when they were ten miles from home Miss Connington had tired of it suddenly, hailed a taxi in the town they were passing through, ordered the bicycles to be put on it, and so the two of them had returned home. On arriving at Greylands, Miss Connington had discovered that she had no money, and had tried to persuade the man to take instead of his fare a brooch that had belonged to her grandmother. The man had refused indignantly, and Miss French had paid him. She told the story with many girlish giggles, throwing many cautious glances in the direction of Miss Connington. Miss Connington generally allowed herself to be chaffed unmercifully, but would occasionally burst out in unbridled rage at the slightest hint of mockery. Already that evening she had been heard cursing the French waiter roundly in his own language. . .

Mrs. and Miss Longfield sat together apart from the others. There was a faint suggestion of superiority and condescension in the smiles with which they greeted the fellow-guests. They wore very fashionable evening dresses that had been bought at Monte Carlo—dresses that made the whole affair seem rather silly and childish.

Mrs. Lattimer avoided the corner where they sat, and

something of her eagerness faded whenever she glanced in their direction.

Dickie Bennett was infected by his hostess's excitement. His air of sullen boredom had dropped from him, and he was running to and fro eagerly at Euphemia's bidding.

"Isn't it fun?" he said. "I say, shall we pop the crackers? What games are we going to play?"

"That's a secret," said Mrs. Lattimer with flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes.

"Now, Mother, don't get too excited," said Mr. Lattimer smiling at her.

"You're just as excited yourself," she retorted laughing.

She drew Euphemia on to one side and whispered:

"It's going splendidly, isn't it? Everyone seems to be enjoying it already. Don't you think so? I've put some things for charades in the cupboard in the corridor. I shall break my heart if we don't have charades, but I know we shall. They're almost worked up to it already. I thought we'd begin with clumps. That always goes well. And then—do you think we could manage musical chairs? I love musical chairs. We had it at our engagement party, didn't we, Father? Look at that child! Isn't it a treat to see her like that?"

And indeed Rosemary Bennett looked for once like the child she ought to have been, skipping excitedly about the room, loosening the balloons from the chairs, peeping into the crackers.

Then, just as Mrs. Lattimer was making a movement towards the crackers, there was a stir at the other end of the room. Mrs. and Miss Longfield were clearing the plates from a table and setting out their racing game on it.

"We brought it along," said Mrs. Longfield in her hard resonant voice. "We thought you'd all like it."

Immediately everyone gathered round it. The artist took his place as croupier. "*Faites vos jeux, mesdames et messieurs. . . .*"

Rosemary Bennett had flown to it, and the old look of unchildlike greed had replaced the eager excitement of her small face.

Mrs. Lattimer watched in helpless dismay.

"It's all right, Mrs. Lattimer, isn't it?" Mrs. Longfield flung at her carelessly.

"Oh yes . . . yes," Mrs. Lattimer managed to say.

Tense silence fell as the mechanical horses began their race across the cardboard, then eager shouting as the winner got home. Mr. Lattimer had taken his place at the table, glancing anxiously at his wife. The pile of crackers stood untouched. The balloons drooped wearily.

Euphemia went across the room to her hostess.

"Let me stop them," she said. "Let me tell them you don't want it."

Mrs. Lattimer shook her head. She was biting her lip, and her eyes were bright with tears.

"No," she whispered; "it's no use now. It's all spoilt now, anyway. It would be more hateful if they stopped than if they went on. She—she might have waited till we'd pulled the crackers. . . I'd meant it to be so jolly."

"I know. I know."

"I shall be all right in a minute. I don't want them to see I'm upset. Go and tell Father I'm all right. He's worrying about me."

They glanced across the room. Everyone was playing except Mr. Featherstone, who was sitting near his wife watching the game, smiling delightedly when she won, looking vaguely uneasy when she lost.

"Go over to them," said Mrs. Lattimer. "I shall be all right in a minute. I don't want anyone to see I mind."

Euphemia went across to the table. There was a shrill scream of excitement from little Rosemary Bennett as her horse won, and an excited buzz of conversation as they placed their next stakes on the board.

Mrs. Lattimer, her eyes still misty and her smile unsteady, wheeled herself over to the table. Her husband furtively caught her hand and pressed it in his as she passed him.

The play went on for an hour . . . two hours. . . Mr. Featherstone still sat, silent and motionless, in the shadow. Euphemia went round to him.

"Mrs. Featherstone's doing quite well, isn't she?" she said.

He made no answer, and she said it again, thinking that he had not heard. Still he did not answer. She touched his arm. He did not move or speak. Then, slowly and with an odd certainty at her heart, as if she had always known that this would happen just here and at this time, she laid her hand on the icy fingers that still held stiffly the arm of his chair. . . He had died—as quietly and unobtrusively as he had lived—in the midst of the excited crowd. He had been dead for more than half an hour when Euphemia spoke to him. His face wore a smile—surprised, pleased, faintly amused—that wiped out the memory of Miss Furmore's face and reconciled Euphemia to death for ever.

XXXI

BRIAN and Elaine sat on the grass on either side of Euphemia's chair. The baby slept on Euphemia's ample lap.

"Stephen," said Elaine firmly. "I've always meant to call my first child Stephen."

"Well, I won't have him called Stephen," said Brian. "It reminds me of gory pictures in foreign art galleries. Why not call him Sebastian while you're about it? Every eldest son of every family ought to be called John. There's simply no question about it. He's going to be called John."

"He is not. I hate the name John. It sounds priggish and smug and insular."

"It doesn't. It sounds just the jolly, friendly, good-natured sort of chap he is. He couldn't be anything *but* John."

"He's going to be called Stephen."

"He's not. John."

"Stephen."

"John."

"You're utterly selfish, Brian. I'm his mother——"

"Well, I'm his father. I'm going to rebel firmly and once for all against this idea that a mother is solely responsible for a child's existence. I'm its father, and it's going to be called John."

"It's! . . . Brian, I do think you might let me have my own way about a thing like this——"

"Well, *I* think you might let me have my own way about a thing like this."

"Children, children!" said Euphemia without taking her eyes from the tiny being that slumbered so peacefully among its freshly laundered embroideries. She was thinking of Mrs. Lewes. It must be fun to have children and grandchildren. . .

"What shall we call him, Tracy?" said Elaine.

"Stephen John," said Euphemia.

"But what shall we *call* him?"

"John," put in Brian.

"Stephen," said Elaine.

"You can call him what you like. I'm going to call him John," said Brian.

"I think you're *hateful*."

He looked at her flushed cheeks and angry eyes, and a half-ashamed grin came over his face, making him look like a sheepish little boy.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm a beast. I was just quarrelling for the sake of quarrelling. Give me a nice kiss, darling, and forgive me. He shall be called Stephen."

He craned his head round Euphemia's knees to meet his wife's soft warm lips.

"I was a beast, too," she said. "I'm not so struck on Stephen after all. Let's call him John."

"No," said Brian firmly. "He's to be called Stephen."

"John."

"Stephen."

"John."

"Brian, you *are* obstinate," said Elaine, her exasperation rising afresh. "You contradict everything I say. I *want* him to be called John. It—it sounds just the jolly, friendly, good-natured sort of chap he is."

"It doesn't. It sounds priggish and smug and insular. And he's going to be called Stephen."

"If you think I'm going to give in again, you're mistaken."

"Same here," said Brian, coolly selecting a juicy piece of grass to nibble.

Euphemia, rose, smiling, with the baby in her arms.

"Go and finish hoeing that bed, Brian," she said. "You

said you wanted to finish it before tea. It's time Elaine fed the baby again."

"But what is it to be called?" said Brian.

"Leave it till you want to quarrel again," said Euphemia.

"It's nice to have a subject handy."

He laughed and drew Elaine to him.

"Let him be called Stephen," he pleaded. "I shall feel a beast if you don't."

"All right, darling," she said happily.

Inside the cheerful little cottage sitting-room Euphemia helped to put the tiny lips to Elaine's white breast.

"Stay with me, Tracy," said Elaine. "See how he pulls. Isn't he greedy? . . . There's a letter from Imogen on the mantelpiece. Do read it. She's such an absurd child. She seems to think that no one else in the world has ever been happy before, just as if she'd invented happiness, as it were. Has the cheek to hint that I'm to be pitied for not being married to her hulking brute of a farmer. Can you see her managing the dairy? Working really hard at it all day and every day? *Imogen* of all people! But I suppose she couldn't imagine me perfectly happy with Brian and the country and—and Stephen. Isn't he a *pet*? Look at him, Tracy. He's watching me with his blue eyes! I am glad I can feed him. She says that she and Peter never quarrel. Well, Brian and I don't either. At least not to *call* quarrelling. We have a little argument occasionally, but that's all. We're certainly as happy as anyone *could* be. You'll stay over tomorrow, wont you, Tracy?"

"I can't. I must go back to town. I've got to look out for another job. Mrs. Featherstone's going abroad, you know."

"Doesn't she want you to go with her?"

"Yes, but I don't want to."

"I wish you'd stay with us. We'd love you to. Brian said something about it last night. I shall be looking after baby all the time, and we shall need someone. He'd pay you as much salary as you want. Brian says that you are the only person in the world he'd like to live with us."

"I shall always feel happy that you asked me, but I mustn't."

"Why not?"

"It isn't on my road. I always know when things are on my road."

"What road?"

"The road I'm going on."

Elaine laughed.

"You are ridiculous, Tracy. On the top you're so matter-of-fact and sensible, but underneath you're—just ridiculous. Why must you run away tomorrow morning, anyway?"

"I've promised to call and see Mr. and Mrs. Host, and then I'm going to stay with Miss Cliffe and look for a job."

"Well, give my love to my respected step-mother-in-law. I've not seen them once since the wedding, but I've heard that he's beginning to get stout. Tracy, look, look! He's smiling at me! Aren't his eyes marvellous? Isn't he having a tuck-in, the greedy little pig!"

They watched the baby in silence while he pulled away lustily, his blue eyes gazing back at them with dispassionate interest. Euphemia was smiling dreamily. She felt the tiny lips tugging at her own breast. . .

Mrs. Host received Euphemia in the familiar drawing-room. She wore a smart black satin dress that had obviously been neither made at home nor bought at a cheap shop. Her shoes and stockings were as obviously expensive, her hands were manicured, her hair sleekly and fashionably "set." She gave Euphemia an affectionate welcome, but she looked abstracted, and the ghost of her old anxiety, protective and maternal now instead of nervous, hovered about her.

"It's *lovely* to see you," she said, "and I know you'll understand about me not asking you to stay the night, but Adrian's just got to the tenth chapter of his new book, and I try to keep the house as quiet as possible till he's well over the tenth. The tenth is always a specially crucial one."

"Is it?" said Euphemia, interested. "I didn't know that."

"Oh yes," said Mrs. Host, "always. Adrian and I always say that if you can keep it alive till the tenth it keeps itself alive after that. But the tenth is crucial. . . . Would you like to see over the house? I've made a few alterations."

In the hall Mrs. Host tip-toed past the library, lowering her voice to a whisper.

"We've had a sound-proof door put into the library to keep the house silent, because, of course, he needs perfect quiet for his work, but somehow I've got into the habit of walking past like this, and I can't get out of it. Here's the dining-room. . . I've had the curtains changed. He finds blue the most sympathetic colour, so I've had blue curtains put up in all the rooms. . . I think his chair gets a better light there than in the old place, don't you?"

"Perhaps."

They went to the little room that had been Euphemia's sitting-room. She stood gazing around it in silence. It seemed years ago since she had sat there darning socks and planning her little shop. It was still peopled with the forms of those who had visited it. Little Miss Pearson sat there drinking her eleven o'clock tea, her tired anxious eyes fixed on the clock lest she should be a second late in returning to her work. Imogen poured out her bitter childish unhappiness there. Brian grinned savagely as he announced that he and his wife had separated. Denis Callander sobbed hysterically on the horse-hair sofa.

"It makes a nice bright little sewing-room, doesn't it?" said Mrs. Host.

In the large front bedroom, its twin beds covered with Italian lace, she was like a priestess in a sacred shrine.

"The curtains are nice, aren't they? I have heavier ones of just the same blue that I put up when there's a full moon. He never likes a strong light, you know, and he doesn't sleep very well when he's at a really crucial point of a book. We sometimes lie awake nearly all the night then, and I read to him to distract his mind. . . . I'm doing a wonderful work, you know, Miss Tracy, in just smoothing his path a little. I—I feel terribly honoured that I should have been called to do it."

"It's nice that you feel like that," agreed Euphemia.

"The day I was married," went on Mrs. Host earnestly, "I vowed that every minute of every day should be given up to him. I've kept my vow, and the only tiny little trouble

I have is that some people don't *quite* appreciate him. They don't, you know."

"That's a nice dress you've got on," said Euphemia.

A complacent smile, behind which hovered the ghost of the old nervous deprecation, crossed Mrs. Host's lips.

"He likes me to look nice. And, of course, for his sake I have to look nice. I have to do him credit, you know. It's—it's a wonderful position to be the wife of a famous man. . . . But"—suddenly the complacency vanished and the nervous deprecation increased—"it does seem *dreadful* somehow—spending all this money on clothes. As much on one dress as I used to spend in a whole year. I can't quite get over the feeling that it's wicked. . . . Of course, it's only due to his position, and that comes first with me and always will, because, Miss Tracy"—a sudden fervent intensity brought the colour to her cheeks and the sparkle to her eyes—"he's the best and kindest and cleverest man who's ever lived. But still—the thought that I spent all that on clothes when my sister hardly knows where to turn to pay the children's boot bills—well, it used to keep me awake at night."

"How is your sister?"

"Of course, she misses me. At first she wanted me to be always going there to see her, but—she expects a bit too much of people, you know. I had to tell her straight out that now I'd got married I must give my time to my husband. Whenever I went to see her I used to be on pins in case he was needing me, so—well, I don't often go now. They're nice enough children," she added, "but inclined to be noisy." (Euphemia remembered with a faint amusement the girl's old passionate devotion to the "nice enough" children, her old timid subjection to the sister who "expected a bit too much of people.") "I mean, I couldn't have them here making a noise when he wants to work. And, of course, when he doesn't want to work he naturally wants me to be with him." Wifely pride visibly swelled Mrs. Host's bosom as she said this.

"He's not very fond of children, is he?" said Euphemia.

"He *adores* them," said Mrs. Host reproachfully. "You

know how *sweet* the children in his books are. But," she looked faintly puzzled, "the children one knows somehow aren't like that, and so, of course, he doesn't find them attractive."

"You don't see much of your sister, then?"

"Not *very* much. I do all I can for her. I send her a lot of things. But she's had to understand that my life isn't my own any longer."

They had returned to the drawing-room, where a dainty tea-table was spread. Mrs. Host sat down to it with an air of matronly dignity that melted suddenly into a naïve embarrassment.

"It seems funny to think of me pouring out tea for you in this house, doesn't it?" she said with a self-conscious little giggle. "Somehow those days seem like a sort of dream. I can't believe they were real. . . . Do have one of these scones. You gave cook the recipe, you know. Adrian has his tea sent into him. He comes in here to have it sometimes, but not——"

"Not at the tenth chapter," supplied Euphemia. "Do you still help him with his work?"

"Of *course*"—Mrs. Host seemed almost shocked by the question—"of *course* I do. . . . And I help him now in ways I couldn't help him before. . . ."

She glanced round the room in a conspiratorial fashion and lowered her voice:

"You see, he's so *sensitive*. . . . You remember that, don't you?"

"I remember him on the days he got bad reviews."

Mrs. Host's voice became still lower, and she moved her chair nearer Euphemia.

"That's it," she said. "They hurt him cruelly. Really cruelly. You see, they're practically all written by men who've tried to write novels and failed, and are jealous of his success. And he's so *sensitive* that, although he *knows* it, he can't help being hurt by them. . . . Well, we talked it over and I begged him to let me open all the reviews first and only keep the ones that did him justice, for him to see, and that's what we do now. I explained to him that it isn't

right to his public to let himself be put off his work—and he is put off his work, you know, when he gets unjust reviews. He's too sensitive for the rough and tumble of life. He needs someone to shield him and that's"—Mrs. Host's blue protruding eyes filled suddenly with tears of emotion—"that's the work that I'm privileged to do. My little contribution to humanity is to keep his spirit calm and peaceful, so that he can go on with his beautiful work."

Euphemia's eyes were dancing, but she compressed her mouth to gravity as she said:

"And he doesn't worry about the reviews he doesn't see?"

"He knows nothing about them," said Mrs. Host earnestly, "and he never thinks of them. He's got such a beautiful, childlike, unsuspecting mind. I believe he's quite forgotten our little arrangement and takes for granted that the ones he sees are the only ones. I burn the unfair ones at once and he never knows anything about them."

"Do you get many?" said Euphemia curiously.

The whisper became yet lower, the chair was moved yet nearer to Euphemia.

"He's got *enemies*," hissed Mrs. Host. "That Elissa Durrant!" she shuddered. "You'd never believe the things she writes about him. Everywhere and in every paper. I have an awful job to keep those away from him. I often have to pretend that I've lost a paper with something of hers in. She sneers at him cruelly. . . . Of course," she nodded her head significantly, "we all know why that is. 'A woman scorned,' you know. And she's not the only one. There's that Denis Callander. He's just as bad. He *persecutes* Adrian. He writes cruel parodies on his style. Tries to be funny about him, you know. Fortunately Adrian's no suspicion of it. I've managed to keep *everything* he's written from Adrian."

"Do you still have the Sunday evening gatherings?"

"Y-yes, but I've got him to make them slightly different. He used to ask people who weren't quite—well, one might almost say quite *loyal*. They were half laughing at him and he knew it, and it hurt him cruelly. So now we

only invite people who *really* appreciate the privilege. People who have written to tell him how much they like his books. And he enjoys them much better than he used to. . . . He's such a sensitive spirit, you know. . . ."

At this moment the sensitive spirit entered. He looked sleeker, more poised, and, as his daughter-in-law had said, stouter. The knowledge that one person admired him sincerely and without any possibility of change had made a different man of him. He entered with his usual air of an actor taking the stage, and greeted Euphemia with elaborate courtesy, then stood behind his wife, one hand placed affectionately on her shoulder. Euphemia felt the old almost uncontrollable desire to clap, though she realised that his acting was quite independent of an audience or rather that he was his own audience.

In the conversation that followed his wife "fed" him perfectly, giving him his every cue, leading up to his best speeches with unfailing but unobtrusive finesse. . . . Watching them, Euphemia was not displeased with her handiwork. They were happy. They had surrounded themselves with carefully built walls of self-deception, in which they lived cosily, warmly, shutting away the outside world. Suppose the walls should ever fall down, leaving them face to face with Reality. . . . But that would never happen. The gods had given to both of them the divine gift of stupidity.

They saw her off at the front door. The author had one arm round his wife's waist, and stood in a carelessly elegant posture that suggested Portrait of Famous Author with Wife.

Miss Cliffe came into the hall of the Belgravia Ladies' Residential Club to greet Euphemia.

"Here you are, my dear. Come straight in to my office and tell me all about everything."

Ensnconced in the creaking basket-chair in the tiny office, Euphemia told Miss Cliffe the full story of her stay at Greylands and of her visits to Elaine and the Hosts.

Miss Cliffe refused to see any pathos or humour in any

part of it. She could see nothing but the horrible fact that Euphemia was again out of a situation.

"It's dreadful," she moaned, "the way everyone you go to dies or gets married. What will you do now?"

"Look out for something else," said Euphemia cheerfully, "There must be heaps of jobs going."

Miss Cliffe shook her head gloomily.

"There aren't," she said. "I can't think why you didn't go abroad with her when she asked you to."

"I couldn't have gone," said Euphemia. "It was the end when he died. The end of that job, I mean. That bit of road didn't go on any further."

"You do talk nonsense sometimes," sighed Miss Cliffe. "I often wish you were as sensible as you look. Are you going to apply for another housekeeper's post?"

"I suppose so," said Euphemia without enthusiasm. A vision of the little shop had flashed alluringly before her gaze for a moment. "There's no hurry, you know. I saved most of my salary when I was with the Featherstones. I can stay here for a time and look round. I'm going to get a new dress, too—the sort I've always wanted."

Miss Cliffe shuddered.

"I expect it will be *awful*," she said.

Euphemia laughed.

"Yes, I expect it will," she agreed.

"I don't know how you've the spirit to enjoy things so," said Miss Cliffe wonderingly. "It's all I can do to struggle on from day to day."

Euphemia looked at her. Her old air of compact efficiency had returned, but with it there was an elusive suggestion of weariness.

"How are things going?" said Euphemia quietly.

The lines on Miss Cliffe's face deepened.

"Oh . . . I'm managing to keep my head above water, but it's a strain. Somehow I can't get back my old spirit. I—I've got to dislike it all so. I used to enjoy it. I never used to look at anything beyond it, but—I'm beginning to get old, Euphemia," she spread out her hands, "and what's going to happen to me? If I can keep the place going, that's

all I can do. What's going to happen to me when I'm too old to work? I keep thinking about it. It's like a nightmare. The place won't fetch anything to speak of, even if I sell it. It's in such bad repair. I ought to have had it done up and modernised ten years ago, but I hadn't got the money and it's too late now. I always prided myself on giving them the best and keeping my terms reasonable. I've kept them too reasonable. I ought to have charged more and gone in for fal lals. I see that now when it's too late. . . . But that's not all. . . ."

"What else is there?" asked Euphemia gently.

"It's—it's that money I owe you, Euphemia. I lie awake all night worrying about it. I shan't know a second's peace of mind till it's paid. . . . Here you are out of a job, needing the money, and Heaven only knows when I shall be able to pay it."

"You *don't* owe it me," said Euphemia savagely. "I *gave* it you. I never want to hear of it again. It's *nothing* in return for all you've done for me. . . . You're never to *think* of it. I don't *want* the money. I shouldn't take it if you tried to give it to me."

But Miss Cliffe's expression of gloom did not lighten.

"You're very good, my dear, but I've got my own pride and self-respect. Its the first time I've ever had to borrow, and it weighs on me more than I can tell you. The fact that you're so kind about it only makes me feel worse about it."

Hannah entered with some letters on a tray. Miss Cliffe opened the top one, read it, then sat up straight as if galvanised into sudden life. Her air of weariness and despair had vanished. Her eyes were shining, her lips curved into an eager smile.

"*Euphemia*, here's something for you. Oh, its providential. . . . It's from a visitor who once stayed here. She was a cousin of old Lady Homerton's, and she says that Lady Homerton's companion has just left her, and they want another, and she asks me if I know of anyone who'd do. The old lady's bedridden and has a maid as well, so it can't be a hard post. *Euphemia*, it's a *godsend*. . . . And that it

should come through me. . . . It"—her voice grew unsteady—"it makes me feel that I can repay you just a *little* for what you've done for me."

Euphemia looked at her in silence. She didn't want to be Lady Homerton's companion. She didn't want to be anyone's companion. But she couldn't bear to cloud the sudden radiance of Miss Cliffe's face.

"All right," she said, "I'll apply for it," and added hopefully, "I don't suppose she'll have me."

XXXII

THE butler who opened the door to Euphemia was old and wizened. His long thin arms and legs made him resemble an ancient spider. His face was of a uniform grey that seemed to extend even to his eyes. He looked a little to the right of Euphemia as he addressed her. His voice was like the rest of him, thin, colourless, faintly malicious.

"Will you step in here a moment, Miss?" he said. "I'll tell her ladyship that you have arrived."

He showed Euphemia into a small waiting-room just inside the front door. She looked about her with interest. A row of hard chairs against the wall, a circular table covered by a faded chenille cloth, supporting a railway guide for 1903, a book-case with glass doors containing a heterogeneous collection of ancient leather-bound books, a small writing-table with a faded blotting pad, and an ink bottle in which the ink had solidified long ago to a black film. On the wooden mantelpiece stood a tarnished brass clock with both fingers missing, flanked on one side by a broken Sèvres vase, and on the other side by a cheap plaque with a view of Windsor Castle in the middle. Euphemia ran her finger along the wooden mantelpiece. It was thick with dust. Then she drew in her breath, savouring with dispassionate interest the faint musty smell that hung over everything.

She turned down a corner of the handsome Brussels carpet. Filthy. It could not have been taken up for years. A wave of indignation swept over her, and she braced herself as a wrestler braces himself for the beginning of a contest. The poor old thing bedridden upstairs, and the place

kept like a pig-sty! The joy of conflict set her pulses racing. She felt as exhilarated as when she had attacked the burglar on the landing of the Belgravia Ladies' Residential Club. Here was something to *do*, something to *fight*. Things had been too easy at her last place. She had grown bored. If she had had enough to do, there would have been no room in her life for sentimental nonsense. She set her large capable teeth. There *must* be no room in her life for sentimental nonsense. She walked with resolute step to the thick window curtains and gave them a brisk experimental shake. A cloud of dust enveloped her.

"Not touched for *years*," she said. "It's time someone took things in hand."

A girl, whose black dress emphasised the pallor of her face, opened the door.

"Her ladyship will see you now," she said in a high-pitched plaintive voice. "Will you come upstairs, please?"

Euphemia followed her up the staircase. A thick coating of dust lay on the ballusters and on the wooden stair ends.

The girl, who had been throwing glances of covert curiosity at her, turned suddenly at the top of the staircase and said,

"I'm her ladyship's maid."

"Well, how you or anyone," said Euphemia, "can live for five minutes in this house without taking a duster to it, I can't think."

The girl shrugged her thin shoulders.

"I've other things to do than that, I can tell you."

She stopped at a door on the first floor and knocked.

Euphemia's heart was still filled with indignant pity. She had formed a mental picture of a helpless old lady, sweet, resigned, neglected. ("It's always the ones with most servants that have the least comfort," she said to herself. "It's time she got someone to look after her.")

The girl opened the door, and Euphemia entered a large, dark, over-heated bedroom. The curtains were drawn, and a roaring coal fire filled the grate. The sudden heat and darkness dazzled Euphemia's eyes, so that at first they saw nothing but the massive shapes of heavy ornamental furni-

ture—a huge wardrobe, a littered dressing-table, a towering wash-stand, a sofa as big as a bed covered by a Chinese shawl whose heavy embroidery gaped in frequent holes. Her eyes had just reached the huge brass bedstead behind the door, when a skinny arm shot out and switched on the electric light. Euphemia blinked in the sudden glare.

The sunken mouth, scraggy neck and yellow wrinkled skin proclaimed the woman in the bed to be a very old woman, but the bright black eyes were young and full of life. The tousled, lustreless black hair that lay on her brow was the less startling because it was so obviously false. It was dead like the face. Only the eyes were alive. They glittered with a curious suggestion of greed and vitality. They seemed to exult maliciously in their triumph over old age.

"You may go, Marie," said the old woman, turning to the girl, who still hovered uneasily at the door.

The girl went out with obvious relief.

There was a silence that lasted for several moments. It was broken by the old woman on the bed.

"Well, what do you think of the place?" she said curtly.

"Its filthy," said Euphemia. "I'd like to spend a week on it with a scrubbing brush."

The old woman laughed—a thin high-pitched cackle.

"You try it," she said. "I'd like to see Moston's face when you do."

"Is he the butler?"

"Yes."

"I didn't like the look of him," said Euphemia.

Again the high-pitched cackle rang out.

"He's a very old friend of mine. I don't pretend that he's either attractive or conscientious, but he's excellent company."

"He doesn't look it," said Euphemia.

"Sit down on that chair. . . . Move it a little this way. I can't see your face properly. . . . What were we talking about? Oh, Moston. . . . Moston knows more scandal about well-known people than anyone else in London. He was in touch with practically every servants' hall in Mayfair

and he used his knowledge. He's a very rich man. I'm flattered that he stays with me. He's no need to work. . . . He came to me first because he wanted to blackmail me. I paid him a fixed sum monthly beyond his salary till my husband died. . . . He never asked for more, and he was always most respectful and a great help to me in every way. By the time my husband died I'd begun to rely on him so much that I kept him. He'd been in service since he was fifteen, and he'd acquired a knowledge of human nature that made him very useful to a woman in my position. I shall keep Moston till I die. He takes me back to old days."

The black eyes looked through Euphemia without focusing her, and for a second Euphemia seemed to see beyond this pitiful travesty of old age to a youth that had been brilliant, alluring, expertly voluptuous.

"That's all gone," went on the old woman, as if she read Euphemia's thoughts, "but the memories remain. And Moston belongs to the memories. That's why I keep him."

Euphemia's mind had returned to her own impression of Moston.

"He could surely *dust*," she said, and added, "Who's your housekeeper?"

The shrivelled lips expanded into a grin.

"Moston's wife. She does her best, of course. But they find it difficult to keep maids. . . . There's a lot of cooking. I like to enjoy my meals." Then with sudden curtness, "You'd better stay here now and send for your things. I shall want you this afternoon."

The skinny arms shot out again and shook a brass bell that stood on her bed table.

The girl reappeared.

"Show Miss Tracy her room, Marie," ordered the old woman, "and then come back here. I shall want you."

Euphemia followed the girl out of the room, realising with something of surprise that she had been engaged without having been given a chance of refusing the situation. The girl took her into a small scantily-furnished room on the same floor.

"You're coming?" she said wonderingly.

Euphemia chuckled.

"I seem to be," she said.

"Heaven help you!" exclaimed the girl.

"I suppose I can leave if I don't like it," said Euphemia.

"Oh no, you can't. Not if she doesn't want you to. Or, if you do, you'll never get another job. She'll see to that. She won't give anyone a reference that leaves of their own accord. Never. And if you give her name, she'll crab you so that no one will employ you. The girl she had before me couldn't get another job, because everyone wanted to know who she'd been with, and, when they asked the old devil, she just crabbed her so that everyone turned her down. She got a job as a Nippy in the end, but it's a come-down. And the one that had your job's had to go to a rest home for nervous cases."

"Well, I think she's pathetic," said Euphemia, "bedridden like that."

The girl laughed shortly.

"*Bedridden!* She's no more bedridden than you are. And what she eats! . . . Heaven knows where she puts it. She's all skin and bone."

"You might keep her clean at any rate," said Euphemia, remembering the faint smell of personal uncleanness that had hung about the room.

"Clean!" shrilled the girl. "If you knew how I tried! I washed her dressing-gown once, and she raved at me for weeks. You wait till you've been here a day, and you'll know what it's like. . . ." The girl lowered her voice. "It's my belief she's possessed of a devil. Same as people in the Bible. And that Moston's worse. He's the devil himself." Her eyes widened and she shuddered with deliberate effect. "Oh, the things that go on here—well, you'd hardly believe. One's as good as a prisoner. And the curtains always drawn."

Euphemia smiled. It was clear that the girl revelled in the situation, seeing it all in terms of melodrama—the wicked aristocrat, the sinister servant, the atmosphere of mystery and evil, the "things that went on." . . .

There came a sudden and prolonged ringing of the brass bell from their employer's room, and the girl started nervously to the door.

"Well, don't say I haven't warned you," she said to Euphemia as she vanished.

Left alone, Euphemia surveyed her room. Then she went down to the hall and through a big baize door into the kitchen. The room was stiflingly hot and filled by a savoury smell of cooking. Beneath the savoury smell Euphemia could distinguish the strange assortment of smells, musty, airless, sour, that hung about the rest of the house, but here the savouriness predominated. Evidently an elaborate meal was in process of preparation. A small thin woman with wispy grey hair and a scar on her cheek that drew up one corner of her lip in such a way that the right side of her face seemed to be laughing while the left cried, was stirring a saucepan at the fireplace. As Euphemia entered, she moved her head to look at her without interest or curiosity.

Moston sat on a chair by the door, reading a newspaper. He lowered it as Euphemia entered and fixed his pale expressionless gaze a few inches to the right of her face.

"I've come for a duster and a pail of water," said Euphemia. "I want to clean my room."

He returned to his newspaper without speaking.

Undaunted, Euphemia began to search the kitchen for cleaning implements. After that first glance neither of its occupants acknowledged her presence in any way. Only once, looking up quickly, she found Moston's gaze fixed again a few inches to the right of her face and knew that he was watching her every movement. In the course of her search she found cooking utensils, crockery, packets of groceries, old newspapers, priceless china, bootlaces, sealing wax, tools, and linen, muddled higgledy-piggledy together in cupboards that had obviously not been cleaned out for years. The bottoms of the cupboards were covered with dusty currants, sugar, suet, and other odds and ends of grocery that had escaped from their bags. A mass of furry mould that had once been some sort of fresh fruit contributed its peculiar smell to the general effect. At the

bottom of one cupboard an overturned jar of treacle mingled freely with the dust and swamped everything within reach.

She discovered at last a pail, a scrubbing brush, a floor-cloth and a duster, all indescribably dirty, and a small hoard of soap. She filled her pail with hot water from the tap, and took her spoils upstairs. First she washed the duster, the floor-cloths, the scrubbing brush. Next she lit the gas fire in her bedroom and spread the duster in front of it to dry. Then she found a lavatory down which to pour the dirty water and a bathroom in which to fill the pail again. Then she took off her skirt, put on her overall, and set to work.

She had been working for some time when she became aware of someone standing just behind her. She turned round, the soap in one hand, the scrubbing-brush in the other. Her employer stood there, tall and gaunt in a grimy lace-trimmed dressing gown. Her wig was awry, her black eyes blazed. She pointed at the gas fire before which the duster was drying.

"Who gave you permission to light that? Do you think I'm *made* of money? Do you want to *ruin* me? No gas or gas fire is to be lit in this house without my permission. I won't have extravagance. I won't have it, I tell you. I won't have it." She wheeled round suddenly to her maid, who stood cowering in the doorway, and pointed with an impressive finger at the gas fire. "Turn that out."

Trembling, the girl obeyed. The old woman stood there, sweeping her keen black eyes round the room. "Where did you get those things?" she said, pointing to the pail and scrubbing brush.

"From the kitchen."

"Did Moston let you?"

"He didn't stop me."

The old woman's anger had disappeared abruptly. She gave her high-pitched cackle of laughter, turned to the door, then wheeled round again.

"You'll find that there's no bulb on the electric light," she said, "and it's no use asking for one. I don't allow my

servants to use the electric light. You're allowed a candle. One candle a fortnight. If you want more you must buy it yourself. Any fool can go to bed and get up in the dark."

She swept out.

Euphemia went on cleaning her room. She felt amused and exhilarated.

"It's going to be interesting," she said to herself, as she selected the exact spot on the window-sill where her geranium should stand.

Before she had finished her room, a sudden excitement filled the house. There was a hurrying up and down stairs, the bell from the bedroom rang furiously, and Marie flew breathlessly into Euphemia's bedroom, saying:

"You're to come and help. Her lunch is ready."

Euphemia made herself tidy and went out. A large service table had been set up outside Lady Homerton's bedroom, and Moston's wife was staggering upstairs with a heavy tray. The savoury smell now filled the house.

Moston was in command, thin, grey, amazingly active. He gave a tablecloth to Marie, then turned sharply to Euphemia with a handful of cutlery and a wine glass.

"Set these out," he muttered, his pale eyes fixed on her right shoulder.

The next hour was like a fantastic dream. Sitting up in bed in the curtained, brilliantly lighted bedroom, the tattered Chinese shawl drawn over her shoulders, the old woman ate such a meal as would not have disgraced a Lord Mayor's banquet, ate it in silence, waited on by Moston, who kept Marie and Euphemia running to and fro with dishes and plates, while his wife staggered up and down the stairs with loaded trays. When the meal was over, Marie settled the old woman to sleep. The black eyes closed almost as soon as the tousled head reached the pillow, and a deep rhythmic breathing filled the room.

"Your lunch will be served in Miss Marie's bedroom in ten minutes," whispered Moston to Euphemia's right shoulder.

In ten minutes she went to Marie's bedroom. On a table

by the window stood two plates, each containing one small thin strip of cold beef and one potato. In the middle of the table were two more plates, each containing three prunes. There were two glasses of water.

"Is that all we get?" said Euphemia.

Marie answered with a sort of gloomy relish.

"Yes. You can ring till you're blue in the face, and no one will answer the bell. And you can go down and ask for more, and he'll squint at you and tell you it's her orders and he can't send up more."

"And is it her orders?"

"Oh yes, she's an old skinflint. She'll eat a meal herself that cost Heaven knows how much and then rave like a lunatic if she sees you using a match instead of a spill. She and Moston rage at each other like tigers sometimes over the bills. . . ." She shuddered again luxuriously, and repeated, "You'd hardly believe the things that go on here. . . ."

Euphemia was warm from the cleaning of her room, but it was a raw sunless day, and Marie sat huddled in a shawl as she ate her inadequate meal.

"If I was to put a light to the gas fire, she'd be in here in less than a second, storming and raving and turning it off. Many's the time I've tried it. Talk about uncanny! People hardly believe it, but it's true."

Euphemia realised the existence of a vague but impressed circle of friends and relations to whom Marie bore the stories of this odd household. These stories were her social passport, as it were. Commonplace and insipid, she derived from them an importance that otherwise she would have lacked, and she was fully aware of it.

"And a fire like a furnace in her room," she went on, "all through the summer no matter how hot it is. And those curtains always drawn. . . It's something chronic, I can tell you."

When they had finished the meal, Marie took out a tea-making apparatus and a tin of biscuits.

"I buy them myself," she said. "I'd starve if I didn't. Now you're here, of course, we can go shares."

Huddled in her shawl, drinking the strong Indian tea that brought an unbecoming flush to her nose, Marie became yet more confidential.

"The place I had before the one before this—well, you'd hardly believe. I was a housemaid then." She flung a glance at Euphemia that was half anxious, half aggressive. "You'd never have guessed I'd ever been a housemaid, would you? Of course, I wasn't an ordinary housemaid. I mean, I've always been very refined. Well, in this place the mistress wore queer dresses right from her neck to her feet. It wouldn't look so odd now, of course, but people wore short dresses then, and she wore a lot of chains and dangling things, and you never heard her step when she walked. Like as if she went on wheels. We'd suddenly see her standing at the kitchen door and watching us, and we'd never know how long she'd been there. And then, as soon as she saw that we'd seen her, she'd turn and glide away again without a word. . . . And she had crosses all over her bedroom wall—the sort that you rub and they shine. Twenty of them she had. They used to give me the creeps. She'd rub them up and set them going herself as soon as it got dark, and then, before she went to bed, I'd always got to go up and count them and see they was all alight. I tell you they scared me so I used to be shivering all over. Twenty little crosses shining in the dark. I used to have nightmares of them. And if one had gone out, I'd got to rub it up and start it going again. I've never come across anything that gave me the creeps so bad. Maud—she was the cook—had to do it on my night out, and she used to be so scared when the time came, that she daren't go up without a stiff dose of brandy.

"The master was all right—as nice a man as anyone ever saw. He went away for a holiday once, and they found his clothes just by a place on the coast, where the bathing was dangerous, and they never found his body. There didn't seem to be any doubt he was dead, and she toggged herself up in black and got all his money, and everything went on as if he was dead.

"Then Maud went to Paris for a week-end on one of these

conducted tours, and she met him in the street as large as life and he grinned at her and said 'Hello, Maud.' She swears to it. Sometimes she thinks it must have been his ghost, but it didn't look like a ghost, she says. And, anyway, why should his ghost haunt Paris and not the place where he died? She never told anyone but me, and I never told anyone. . . . The mistress sometimes didn't speak for days, except when she was alone in her bedroom, then you'd hear her talking and laughing in a way that turned your very blood cold.

"My, that was a queer place. . . . I was scared stiff of that woman."

There was again a gloomy complacency in Marie's voice, as if the "queerness" of the place redounded somehow to her credit.

"How did you come here?" said Euphemia.

"Have another biscuit—well, the next post I had the mistress came into a lot of money, and had me trained as a lady's maid, because she was frightened of starting off with a stranger, and I was with her for a year, but she was a bit common, and I thought I might as well better myself. And, of course, I was pleased to get with the aristocracy . . . though the things I've had to put up with!"

"Why do you stay if you feel like that?" said Euphemia. The girl shrugged.

"Well, she's told me she won't give me a reference, if I go of my own accord. I'd never get another job like this. I mean not with the aristocracy. She's a holy terror but she belongs to the aristocracy all right. I don't want to go to a 'nuvvo rectch' like my other lady was. And," she shuddered, "I'm too refined to go back to being a housemaid, though she treats me like dirt."

Her blue eyes looked dazed and dazzled by the combined lure of aristocracy and melodrama. "Besides," she ended with a little simper, "one never knows what will happen. . . . And now, dear, tell me something about yourself."

But at that moment the brass bell pealed again urgently, and Euphemia followed Marie into the bedroom. Lady

Homerton was sitting up in bed talking to Moston who stood by her bedside. She turned sharply as they entered.

"My great-nephew is coming to see me with his *fiancée*," she announced briskly. "Get out my things, Marie, quickly. Miss Tracy, help her."

Her black eyes sparkled vivaciously.

"Quickly! *Quickly*! Did he say what time he'd be here, Moston?"

"No, my lady," said Moston. "He just said that he hoped to visit you this afternoon, if quite convenient."

Marie had already taken a box of make-up from one of the drawers in the dressing-table. Euphemia held the mirror, while Marie drew the pad of rouge across the wrinkled skin, darkened the eyebrows, and reddened the thin shrivelled lips.

"*More*, you fool! I don't want to look half dead. They wish I was dead all right." The shrill cackle broke out startlingly. "But I'm not dead, and I won't be for many many years. Outlive them all. . . . Put it on, put it on, put it on. . . . What are you frightened of? . . . Now get my other wig and my jewel case."

The removal of her wig revealed a few straggling grey hairs over which a more elaborate, less tousled black wig was arranged. As Marie hurried about the room, fetching and carrying, Euphemia saw why the old woman kept her as her maid. Her pretty stupid face and angular body gave no hint of the deftness of her movements. The girl herself was probably quite unaware of it. A diamond tiara was pinned across the front of the black wig. A dingy lace dressing-gown was arranged over the sunken chest and pinned together with a diamond brooch. A high "dog collar" of seven strands of pearls was fastened round the scraggy neck. Throughout the operation Euphemia had to hold the heavy mirror.

"Keep it steady, you fool," snapped the old woman, whenever her hand trembled. At last she was ready. . . . Moston turned out the electric light and lit the candles that stood about the room in elaborate candelabra. Looking at the painted old woman blazing with jewelry in the candle-

lit room, Euphemia found it almost impossible to believe that outside the closed curtains ordinary people were walking about in daylight streets.

Moston announced the visitors with ironic formality, then, casting his pale disturbing gaze about the room, vanished. So extraordinary was the whole scene that it was the visitors, young, well dressed, good looking, who seemed abnormal in it.

They sat down on the two chairs by the bed. The young man was obviously embarrassed.

"This is my new companion," said the old woman, waving a long claw-like hand, loaded with diamonds, in Euphemia's direction. The young man smiled nervously. The girl threw her a bright, amused glance.

"Well," said the young man with an uncomfortable laugh, "How are you, Aunt Augusta?"

"Very well indeed," said the old woman, "as you can see for yourself."

"It's some time since I came to see you," he went on with increasing embarrassment, "but you mustn't think I've forgotten you."

The old woman flashed him an ironic smile.

"I'm sure you haven't, my dear Godfrey. One does not forget those by whom one wishes to be remembered. . ."

She turned to the girl. "And how are you, my dear? Tell me what you're doing this year."

There followed a list of the season's activities, the old woman shooting out a series of sharp interruptions and comments.

"Who else was there? . . . Lady Morna Denhurst? I knew her grandmother. She was Sir Gerald Forrester's mistress. Her husband knew about it but turned a blind eye. . . . Daisy Ferrows? Still trying to get her girls off? The youngest must be forty. . . . Lord Drewer? Was his wife there? He wasn't fit to marry anyone, but her mother made her marry him. I was at the wedding. She was crying so much she could hardly say the responses. She was in love with young Dorset, but he hadn't a farthing. She had a child by him later. The resemblance was ridiculous. . .

He married Gertrude Penhurst's girl. Then left her for an actress."

Moston came in with a loaded tea-tray, which he put down on a table by Euphemia. Euphemia poured out tea, and Marie handed round the plates. The visitors ate heartily, seeming to welcome the diversion.

"How's your Uncle Alexander?" said the old woman to her great-nephew.

"His heart's wonky," said the boy. "He's had to cut out golf and shooting."

The old woman cackled triumphantly, rubbing her flashing hands together.

"He's breaking up, breaking up. . . They're all breaking up. How's your Aunt Anne?"

"She's gone over to Aix for treatment for her rheumatism."

Again the high triumphant cackle broke out.

"Ho, ho! Only a year ago she was boasting she'd never had a twinge. . . . Breaking up, breaking up, breaking up. . . . They're all breaking up. . . I'll outlive them all."

After tea the visitors rose with obvious relief to take their leave. The bright eyes flashed enigmatically at them as the old woman said good-bye.

"Miss Tracy will show you out," she added.

Euphemia led the way downstairs. In the hall the young man glanced around nervously, then lowered his voice.

"How—how does she seem?" he said.

"I only came here to-day," said Euphemia. "She seems very well to me."

"Er-yes," he said without enthusiasm, "she's a hardy old devil. . ."

There was a short silence.

"Does she seem—I mean, would you call her—" He stopped in confusion.

"Godfrey means," said the girl coolly, "does she seem to be in possession of all her faculties?"

"Yes," said the boy with relief. "Is she potty? You see, if she is—"

"Shut up," whispered the girl. "Probably that old devil of a butler's listening somewhere."

"Well, look here," he turned again irresolutely to Euphemia, obviously the bearer of a mission that he was reluctant to perform, "if you'd just let us know occasionally how she's going on. . . . Personally I think she's as batty as they make 'em, but the governor's tried often enough to get the doctors——"

"Don't chatter so, Godfrey," said the girl. She turned with a radiant smile to Euphemia. "Which is your free afternoon?"

"It hasn't been decided yet," said Euphemia, realising this for the first time.

"Well, Godfrey's mother wants you to come to tea with her," said the girl. "Come any and every time you can. Godfrey will fetch you in the car. Godfrey's so fond of the dear old lady."

She shook hands heartily with Euphemia, then took her leave with her escort, remarking in her clear young voice as they went down the steps, "Well, I did my best for you, my lad."

Euphemia went slowly upstairs. The old woman, still bedecked in her finery and sitting upright in bed, turned to her eyes that glittered with sardonic amusement.

"How much have they offered you for your weekly report?" she said.

Euphemia smiled.

"Nothing."

"They've asked you to tea on your free afternoon?"

"Yes."

The old woman cackled, delighted. "Their bribes are always quite discreet. Brooches and leather hand-bags and boxes of your favourite sweet. What's your favourite sweet? Your predecessor's was *marrons glacés*. Her digestion was permanently ruined by them. . . . In return she furnished them with examples of my alleged insanity. You see, Godfrey's father wants power of attorney. What makes it more annoying for them is that they don't know whether I'm a pauper or a millionaire. Godfrey's father came to see me

only last month, and brought two doctors with him. He introduced them—quite unconvincingly—as friends of his. I behaved with disappointing sanity. I discussed the political situation. I quoted Voltaire. I told them some interesting stories about society in my youth. The doctors found me much saner than Godfrey's father. Godfrey's father has not been to see me since. He's begun to send Godfrey. After all, Godfrey is twenty-two. It's high time he was initiated into the family business of trying to prove me insane. He'll probably be quite as amusing as his father was."

Her voice suddenly grew sharp and querulous. "Get out the boxes and take off my things. Quickly, quickly, quickly! Why are you hanging about there doing nothing?"

Euphemia brought out the jewel-box, and Marie took off the tiara, dog collar, and brooches, then changed the wig for the other more tousled and less elaborate one. The old woman's excitement had suddenly changed to irritability. She found fault with everything they did, snapping at them continually in the harsh resonant voice that, like her eyes, had nothing of old age in it.

Just as they had taken off her wig Moston appeared, staggering under the weight of a large coal-box. The old woman jerked her head away from their hands, the muscles of her scraggy neck working convulsively.

"Who gave you orders to bring in tea?" she said to him. "Haven't I told you over and over again that I won't have food wasted in this house? Why should I feed every Tom, Dick, and Harry who sets foot in it? Can't they wait till they get home to eat? Do you want to see me in the workhouse?"

Moston appeared unperturbed by her anger. He threw her a truculent glance from under his colourless lashes as he knelt down by the fireplace and began to fill the coal-bucket.

"You in the workhouse!" he muttered, "you're worth half a million if you're worth a penny."

She screamed at him, beside herself with fury.

"How do you know what I'm worth? Have you been poking and prying in my papers? I won't have it, I tell you.

I won't have it. How dare you go poking and prying in my papers and chattering about my affairs!"

He shrugged his shoulders and went out with his empty coal-box.

The old woman fell back among her cushions, suddenly exhausted. Her eyelids drooped, and almost immediately she began to breathe in long deep regular breaths.

Euphemia followed Marie from the room.

"Him and her go on for hours sometimes," said Marie. "He doesn't care what he says to her. . . . Well, I'd better be getting on with something. She'll make a scene if I've done nothing while she's asleep. She can't bear to think that anyone has a minute to call their soul their own. . . . I'm mending some old lace in one of her boxes. She's got boxes and boxes of stuff put away, and she keeps you going over it till you could scream, but I suppose you won't be expected to begin till tomorrow."

Euphemia went to her room. Her belongings had arrived. She put the geranium on the window-sill and began to arrange her clothes in the cupboards and drawers.

The brass bell sounded as soon as she had finished. Already preparations for her employer's dinner were going on—the service table in the corridor, the savoury smell, the clatter of china and cutlery. The old woman was sitting up in bed. Her vitality had been restored by her nap, and she was ready for the Gargantuan feast that, course by course, would be carried upstairs by Moston's wife and served by Moston.

When she had finished, Marie and Euphemia withdrew to Marie's bedroom where a supper of bread and cheese was laid for them.

"And not a crumb more," said Marie with a gloomy satisfaction, "not a crumb more if we ring the bell off for it."

She took one of the small pieces of bread and then sat gazing dreamily at Euphemia. A faint flush had crept into her cheeks.

"He's ever so nice-looking, isn't he?" she said with a simper.

"Who?" asked Euphemia.

"Mr. Godfrey. . . . Between you and I, I shall be surprised if that marriage ever comes off."

"Why?"

"He didn't seem a bit keen on her, I didn't think. . . . They were sitting close together and I never once saw him try to squeeze her hand." The faint flush deepened. "I simply didn't know where to look when he looked at me."

And then Euphemia knew what Marie had meant earlier in the day when she had said, "Of course anything might happen." It was all part of the melodrama. The disagreeable old woman's handsome young great-nephew must fall in love with the disagreeable old woman's lovely young attendant. It was inevitable. It was part of the tradition. All Marie had to do was to sit and wait for it. . . .

XXXIII

EUPHEMIA and Miss Cliffe met on the doorstep of the Belgravia Ladies' Residential Club. Euphemia wore a mauve silk dress with a fichu-like collar of ecru lace, and a black straw hat. She spread out her arms, displaying herself.

"Well?" she said.

But Miss Cliffe did not even notice that Euphemia was not wearing the brown coat and skirt. Her cheeks were flushed, and she was trembling with excitement.

"I was just coming to see you," she said breathlessly. "Oh, my dear, do come in. You'll never guess."

She took hold of Euphemia's arm and drew her up the steps, through the hall, and into the little office that was cluttered up with ledgers and the enormous wireless.

"My dear, I've only just heard. It's like a dream, I can't believe it. I simply can't believe it."

"But what is it?" said Euphemia.

"Oh, my dear, don't keep interrupting. I can never tell you if you keep interrupting. I simply don't know where to begin. It's—it's like a miracle. I can pay my debt to you." ("Rubbish! it isn't a debt," put in Euphemia.) "I can put this place on its legs and get rid of it. I can—oh, it seems like Heaven. I can buy a cottage in the country and live there for the rest of my life."

"How? Why?" gasped Euphemia.

"Oh, my dear, I'm trying to tell you, but you will keep interrupting. A legacy, my dear. I've only just heard. I don't know whether I'm standing on my head or my heels. Yes, of course I do. I've always thought that such a silly expression. A legacy from an uncle I didn't know existed.

He left home when he was sixteen and was never heard of again. Everyone thought he was dead. And now he's just died in Australia, and all his money comes to me. At least, it was left to my father or his children, and my father and mother are dead, and I'm the only child. Not a fortune, of course, but I don't want a fortune. It's enough. Enough to pay off all my debts and buy a cottage in the country and keep me, and what in the whole of Heaven and earth could I want more? . . . Euphemia, do you remember the village you used to tell me about, the one where you lived before you came to London?"

"Yes, of course," said Euphemia soothingly.

There was something almost painful in Miss Cliffe's excitement.

"You used to tell me about it, and I used to think how heavenly it would be to live in a place like that, to have a little cottage just like yours. I was coming straight to you, Euphemia, because I wanted you to come down with me to the village, to look round and see if there was a cottage to let. I've set my heart on that village. I don't know why. Probably with hearing you talk about it just when I was sick and tired of bustle and noise and streets and shops, and people chivying me from morning to night. Can you start now, straight away?"

"Yes, of course I can," said Euphemia soothingly. "It's my free afternoon, you know. I was coming to see you." In the train Miss Cliffe suddenly noticed Euphemia's dress and hat.

"Oh, my *dear!*" she said, gazing at it apprehensively. "You're beginning to break out. I always knew you would." Euphemia laughed.

"That's not breaking out," she said. "That's the greatest disappointment of my life. . . . I'll tell you all about it. I'd wanted to have the dress I'd always dreamed of—real purple with flowers and lace—and a hat with purple feathers. And as soon as Lady Homerton paid me my first month's salary I went to get it. And—it was a dreadful shock—the minute I began to describe it to the dressmaker, I found that I didn't want it. I could have cried. I'd *lived*

for that dress and hat ever since I left home, and then—to find that I didn't want them! It's horrible to think that Life can do things like that to you."

"Don't be ridiculous, Euphemia."

"I'll try not to be," said Euphemia with dancing eyes. "So then I began to think what sort of a dress I would like, and I thought of this. . . Do you like it?"

"Y—yes," said Miss Cliffe guardedly. "It's well cut and it makes your figure look quite decent. But you must be careful, Euphemia. You've got a tendency to break out, you know."

"I know. I should hate to lose it. That's why I felt so disappointed when I found that I didn't want my purple dress. It was as if I'd lost a part of me, and a part I'd been very fond of. Still—it can't be helped. It's a pretty collar, isn't it? And don't you like the ruching?"

"They're both a bit overdone," said Miss Cliffe critically. "It's quite nice, in a way, but it's too bright a mauve, and the collar should have been plainer, and the ruching shouldn't have been there at all. The general effect is too dressy. For anyone in your position, I mean."

"I'm so glad," said Euphemia with a sigh of relief. "It was so different from my purple dress that I was afraid it was dull, and I should hate it to be dull. Finding that I didn't want that dress gave me a shock. I hope I shan't feel the same about my shop."

But Miss Cliffe wasn't listening. She was looking at Euphemia and remembering the woman who had come to the door of the Belgravia Ladies' Residential Club that evening two years ago. Emotion had quickened her perceptions, and she saw clearly the changes that the two years had wrought in her. Her youth, released from its long imprisonment, had informed the mask of heaviness that had been assumed as an armour against her father's unkindness. It played at the corners of the large mouth. It lit up the brown eyes. With suddenly clearer vision she saw, too, that knowledge of life had blended with the old romantic dreams, bringing not disillusionment but understanding.

Then the train slid into Market Felton station, and Miss Cliffe forgot everything but her cottage. . .

"Here we are, Euphemia," she said, throwing open the carriage door. "Oh. . . do hurry!"

Euphemia was disappointed that the 'bus conductor was not the same one as on the day when she ran away from George. Miss Cliffe's thoughts had returned to her legacy.

"The most heavenly moment of all came this morning, Euphemia. I couldn't help telling Hannah because she knew how worried I'd been about the two second floors not getting let. I told her not to tell a soul, but—poor old thing, I suppose she couldn't help it. She was as excited as if it had been herself. Anyway, in five minutes the whole place knew, and, of course, in came Mrs. Lancaster, all flustered and as sweet as honey, to ask what I was going to do and if I was going to give the place up. Her cousin has hardly been near her since that holiday in Scotland. I expect he saw through her then. . . Of course, I said I was going to take a place in the country, and she started trying her blarney on me, and saying how fond she was of me and what old friends we were and that she hoped that, when I gave up the Club, she might have a room in my cottage. She said she'd always been so happy with me and that we would prevent each other feeling lonely. Well, it was the grandest moment of my life when I told her that I'd rather be alone. Ah, here we are."

They got down from the 'bus. Euphemia's heart was beating unevenly. The old scenes brought to her an emotion for which she was unprepared.

Miss Cliffe stood gazing down the wide old-fashioned village street with its cobbled sidewalks and the huge chestnut tree that grew from the middle of the road. A few hens were scratching energetically in its shadow. An air of slumbering peace lay over everything.

"It's heavenly," she said. "It's just as you described it."

Euphemia chuckled.

"You won't find hot and cold water laid on here," she said. "There isn't even electric light. Gas is quite up to date. Half of the cottages haven't even gas."

"I shall adore it," said Miss Cliffe fervently. "I'm sick of hot and cold water laid on and electric light. I'm sick of the people who nose about and say, 'We *must* have running water in the bedrooms and an electric light over the bed.' I'm sick of feeling that I've got to have all the latest improvements put in the place as soon as they come out, whether I can afford it or not. It's made me long to be primitive. I want to get my water from a pump, and my light from an oil lamp. I want to be hundreds and hundreds of years behind the times."

"You'll be able to be that all right here," smiled Euphemia.

"Let's find your cottage first of all," said Miss Cliffe. "I want to see that before I do anything else."

They walked down the sunny village street, till they came to the two little white-washed cottages standing side by side. The sight brought a sudden catch to Euphemia's heart. She saw herself as a child playing in the garden, saw her mother's slight figure bending over the flowers, felt, as she looked up to the window of her father's room, that fear of him that she had never acknowledged in the old days even to herself, and that she recognised now for the first time and with something of surprise.

Suddenly Miss Cliffe gave a little gasp and said, "Look! Look! Oh *Look!*"

Euphemia looked and saw the "To be Let or Sold" notice stuck awry in the little hedge.

"It's to be let or sold," panted Miss Cliffe. "Oh, let's go and look at it. I *must* go and look at it."

She fetched the keys from the post office and went over the tiny house with exclamations of rapture.

"It's just what I wanted," she said. "It's heavenly! It's ideal!"

"I ought to have brought my geranium to see it," said Euphemia dreamily. "It used to live here."

"I shall have cretonne curtains with a tiny old-fashioned pattern," said Miss Cliffe, "and a rocking chair and a settle and an old wooden dresser. And I shall make my own bread and do all the garden myself, and I shall grow

flowers and vegetables and sit in the garden on summer evenings, and—oh, it's what I've longed for and never dared to let myself think of all these years."

"There's a nice little garden behind as well," said Euphemia.

They went into the back garden, and the first thing they saw was George's head over the hedge, his mouth wide open, his eyes protruding with amazement.

"Good afternoon, George," said Euphemia pleasantly.

George gulped with a sort of helpless indignation. To speak to him like that, cool as a cucumber, after the trick she had played him. . . .

Another face rose up from the fence beside him—a face with blue eyes, a petulant mouth, and a receding chin. It was a face Euphemia had never seen before. Evidently George had gone far afield for his wife. (As a matter of fact, he had gone as far as Brighton pier.) The blue eyes took in Euphemia and Miss Cliffe with a slightly affronted air, then George's wife pulled him away sharply.

"Staring at them like that!" she snapped. "Who are they?"

"The tall one used to live there till her father died," said George. "Tried all she could to get me for years, she did. Even gave out we were engaged once and got folks to believe her, but I wasn't having any of her—not me!"

"Go on!" she said. "I bet no one ever tried to get you."

But the petulant mouth had grown slightly less petulant.

"Honest she did," said George. "The way she made up to me was the talk of the place."

"Tell me another," she said, but his value in her eyes, which had been at a low ebb, increased slightly, and she decided to give him his favourite dish (beans and bacon), for supper instead of the porridge that she had meant to warm up.

Euphemia and Miss Cliffe came slowly out of the little front gate.

"I wish you'd come and live with me, Euphemia. Give that old woman notice today. I feel dreadful, anyway,

about having got you into a place like that. I'd no idea that the woman was mad."

"She isn't," said Euphemia. "Godfrey's father would pay you quite a lot of money if you could prove that she was. She's a devil certainly, but an amusing one."

"You can't stay there," said Miss Cliffe.

"Yes, I can," said Euphemia, "for the present, anyway. I shan't stay indefinitely, of course, but I shall know when the time's come for me to move on."

"Oh, well . . . I simply can't think of anything but my cottage just now. Come into the church with me, Euphemia. I want to say 'Thank you' for it."

XXXIV

THERE was, as Marie had predicted, ample work for the two of them. It was as if their employer could not bear to see either unemployed for a second. There were innumerable boxes in the attics full of odds and ends, lace, old dresses, letters, fans, knick-knacks, lengths of silk, old photographs, pieces of discoloured silver, packets of ancient Christmas cards and valentines. All this had to be sorted, rearranged, inventoried. ("And when we've got through all of them," said Marie, "we'll have to start again and do them different. I know her.")

Euphemia read aloud to the old lady several hours a day. Her taste in literature was catholic. She wanted, on the same day, Edgar Wallace, Aphra Benn, the *Cambridge Constitutional History of England*, the *Letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montague*, and Dickens. She would suddenly tire of a book and demand another, growing impatient at the slightest delay. In her youth her beauty and wit had given her power, and the lust for power remained with her in the days of her old age, so that she had to satisfy it as best she could by keeping two women running about at her bidding. Occasionally she would bully them with a sort of deliberate ferocity. Marie melted easily into tears, but Euphemia received the old woman's insults imperturbably. Time seemed to slip back, and she was in her father's bedroom again. She had forged an armour for herself in those days, and it was still there, ready to be buckled on at need. No insolence or abuse could get under her guard. The old woman, annoyed and disconcerted, redoubled her efforts and, still meeting with no success, became amused by the situation.

"You're the only woman I've ever lived with," she told Euphemia, "whom I've not been able to make cry."

Sometimes she was excellent company, witty, vivacious, charming. She would often keep Euphemia talking with her far into the night, telling her stories of the past, taking her into worlds she had never known. Once she stayed there till morning, and could hardly believe that the morning had come, so enthralled had she been. The old woman slept very little at nights. She had the power of falling several times during the day into a deep sleep that lasted only a short time and yet completely restored her abounding vitality. The evening bedroom preparations consisted in placing a large cooked ham and bottle of wine on a table by the old woman's bed. She ate an amazing amount of cooked ham during the night. Often Moston would sit up with her, playing backgammon or retelling his best stories. She would frequently ring the little brass bell, summoning Marie and Euphemia from their beds for some quite unnecessary service.

On some nights, she would feel restless and prow! round the house by herself, a tall gaunt figure, wrapped in the dingy lace dressing-gown, holding a candle. She would descend to the basement and wander about the kitchen, examining every corner. The dirt and untidiness, the misuse of valuable antiques (a Wedgwood jar used as a receptacle for cooking lard, an eighteenth-century Bristol glass candlestick holding a tallow candle on the scullery copper) did not trouble her, but evidences of any fresh painting of the peeling woodwork, any renewal of the mouldy, gaping paper, would send her into a frenzy of anger.

"Who's going to pay for it?" she would storm at the unmoved Moston. "Do you think I am a millionaire? I tell you I won't have you playing ducks and drakes with my money! You'll drive me to the workhouse with your extravagance. It needed painting? Nonsense! Of course it didn't need painting. Don't contradict me. I tell you it *didn't*! If it did you could have done it yourself. I won't pay a penny for it."

To do Moston justice, it was very seldom that he ordered any repairs to the house.

She received frequent visits from her relations, smart, well-dressed people, who sat for an hour or so, miserably ill-at-ease beneath her sardonic irony. With skill and cunning she laid bare their plans to insinuate themselves into her favour or to prove the insanity of which they were all secretly convinced. She watched with a smile of grim amusement their efforts to win the confidence of Euphemia and Marie. Marie accepted their invitations and presents with deep gratification, confidently expecting on each occasion to meet at last the prince who was to rescue her from the ogress's castle. She would say anything they wished her to say, but, as it was well known that a glance from the old woman could make her contradict herself flatly, her evidence was not regarded as very useful. Euphemia found it convenient to have no free afternoon. There were times when she felt something in the old woman strangely akin to something in herself—an unquenchable vitality, a zest for life, a mellow amusement at the world around her.

She often tried to dislike her for her meanness, her petty tyranny, but it was difficult for Euphemia really to dislike anyone. She grew more strongly aware, however, that she could not stay here. It was not, as she put it to herself, one of her places. She thought with amusement of the innocent plans she had formed for cleansing the Augean stables and brightening the life of the neglected invalid as she stood in the little waiting-room on the day of her arrival. Though she realised now that she could not stay much longer, the moment of her departure arrived sooner than she had thought.

She was sitting with her employer at midnight, reading aloud to her, when suddenly the old woman stopped her in order to dictate a letter to her bank manager. It was in answer to one she had received some days ago, and there was no particular hurry for its despatch. But the old woman said it must go at once.

"Ring for Marie to take it to the post."

"It's after twelve o'clock," said Euphemia. "Marie's in bed."

"Then she can get up."

"It's no time for a young girl to go to the post."

The old woman bared her gums angrily.

"Are you the mistress of this house, or am I?"

"I'll take the letter to the post, if it must go."

"I want you to go on reading to me."

"Then ring for Moston."

"Moston can't leave the house. Marie is going to take that letter to the post."

She rang the bell violently.

Marie appeared, sleepy-eyed, hugging her dressing-gown about her.

"Get dressed at once," said the old woman, "and——"

Euphemia interrupted.

"Go on reading to her ladyship," she said to Marie, "I'm just going out to the post." She took the letter and, turning to the old woman, said quietly, "You're an obstinate old fool, and I'm leaving you tomorrow."

"You don't get a penny out of me if you do," screamed the old woman. "Nor a reference."

"I'll do without, then," said Euphemia.

She posted the letter and went for a walk round the empty moonlit streets. A sudden feeling of exaltation possessed her. The ridiculous fantastic nightmare was over. She was free again, free, free, free. The world lay before her. . . .

When she got back Marie was waiting for her in her bedroom, shivering, her dressing-gown clutched tightly about her.

"She's been going on something chronic," she said in a thrilled whisper, "storming and raving at you like I don't know what. Now she's gone off to sleep quite sudden. . . She won't give you a penny, you know, and she'll tell no end of lies about you if anyone goes to her for a reference. That's her way of getting her own back."

"I shan't go to her for a reference. . . Why don't you get out of it, too? She'll grow worse and worse."

"Oh no," said Marie. "I'd never get another post like this, you know. Not this class. Not with the aristocracy. I'd hate to have to be an ordinary housemaid again. . . . Besides," vaguely, and with her foolish little simper, "anything might happen, you know."

XXXV

"THERE!" said Miss Cliffe, stepping down from the ladder and gazing critically up at the curtains. "*That's* all right, isn't it?"

Euphemia rose from the floor that she was engaged in scrubbing and wiped her steaming hands on her apron. "It looks lovely," she said. "I'm longing to see it with the furniture in."

She was thinking: It's father's bedroom. He used to lie in bed here all day and all night. He used to bully mother and try to bully me. I've often seen mother go out of that door crying. George used to come in at it carrying his backgammon board. . .

"Well, it will be in tomorrow," said Miss Cliffe. "Oh, Euphemia, it's going to look even more wonderful than I thought it would. Aren't the curtains quaint with those little frills along the top!" She looked at her watch. "It's after lunch time. Let's go down and have something to eat."

Euphemia dried her hands and followed Miss Cliffe down the narrow, steep staircase. (It was just here I turned to look at George that night.)

Two packing-cases stood in the middle of the empty kitchen. On one was a picnic-basket containing the sandwiches and coffee that Euphemia had prepared that morning at the Club.

"Come along," said Miss Cliffe briskly, perching on one end of the vacant packing-case, and motioning Euphemia to perch beside her, "let's eat it quickly and get on with the cleaning. I do so want to finish it today."

At that moment there was a knock at the cottage door and George's wife entered, carrying a currant cake in her hand. She looked aggressive and had obviously put on her best clothes for the visit.

"I've just been baking," she said, "and I thought you'd likely do with a cake. One's apt to forget food and suchlike settlin' in."

She laid the cake on the packing-case, received Miss Cliffe's profuse thanks with increased aggressiveness, and departed abruptly without saying good-bye.

"*Such a nice little woman,*" said Miss Cliffe happily. "I know I'm going to love having her for a neighbour. . . It's still like a dream to me, you know, Euphemia. I don't think anyone's ever been so happy before since the world began. Mrs. Lancaster's being as catty as she can be, and it only makes me want to laugh. The new people won't keep her on at the old price, you know, and she's going next week as soon as they take over."

"Where's she going?"

"Miss Greeves has taken a flat in St. John's Wood, and she's asked Mrs. Lancaster to live with her. She's off her head with delight because Mrs. Lancaster says she will. The little fool's in for a lifelong slavery, and she glories in it. I've no pity for her. . . . You do make good sandwiches, Euphemia."

"Yes, don't I? Here's one at thirty-six pounds a year," said Euphemia, who was studying the piece of newspaper in which the scrubbing-brushes had been wrapped.

"What? A sandwich?"

"No, a shop. . . I've always wanted a shop, you know."

"But what about Greylands?"

"Greylands?"

"Didn't I tell you? Oh, my dear, how dreadful of me! You know, this cottage has simply driven everything else out of my head. Dr. Marriott called at the Club yesterday about Greylands. Someone's started building another hotel just near it, and it's made Mr. Craig realise suddenly that the whole thing's not a joke. He's got to sell quickly or pull Greylands up, and he's chosen to pull Greylands up. He's

quite keen about it. Dr. Marriott says he wants to get a good housekeeper, but the cook's the snag. He's a wonderful cook, you know, but he's temperamental and difficult to work with. He's been boss of the whole show up to now, and at first he said he wouldn't stay and work under a housekeeper, but in the end he said he'd stay if they engaged you. Mr. Craig himself suggested you. You evidently made a good impression on them all when you were there. His only chance, of course, is to run it as a country house and leave the hotel atmosphere to the other place. . . . He got in touch with Dr. Marriott and asked if he knew whether you were free, and Dr. Marriott came to see me yesterday afternoon. Then I went out and found that wonderful little gate-leg table, and then you came this morning saying you'd left the old woman and could help me move in, and—well, I completely forgot Dr. Marriott."

"What did he say?"

"He was wondering if you'd go over with him some afternoon and see Mr. Craig and the place. I said that your free afternoon was next Wednesday—I didn't know you'd be leaving suddenly, of course—and that I'd find out if you'd like to go over with him and let him know. How *dreadful* of me to have forgotten, Euphemia!"

"It's all right," said Euphemia. She was gazing unseeingly in front of her.

"But I really will write to him the moment I get back," said Miss Cliffe. "I'll say you'll go with him and talk it over with Mr. Craig, shall I?"

Euphemia was silent. ("Don't go," she was saying to herself. "You don't really want the job. Don't go. Don't be a fool. . . .") "I will be a fool if I want to be . . ." she answered herself defiantly.)

"Yes, I'll go," she said, turning a challenging gaze upon Miss Cliffe.

"What on earth are you looking at me like that for?" said Miss Cliffe.

"Like what?" . . . Euphemia rose abruptly. "I'll wash out the cups while you go on hanging the curtains. Then I'll come and finish the floor."

"Right!" said Miss Cliffe cheerfully and went clattering up the little wooden staircase.

Euphemia took the cups over to the sink then suddenly stood still, gazing with amazement into the village street.

A well-known figure was walking along it, carrying a suit-case. It was walking delicately on high-heeled shoes, betraying every sign of consternation as one of the hens left the chestnut tree and approached. . . . It was Marie.

Euphemia went to open the door, and Marie entered, pouring out her story tearfully.

"Left her for good, I have. Flesh and blood could stand no more. And I don't care if she won't give me a character. I'm sick of it. A house of terror, it is, what with that old devil and all. Still, I'd have put up with that part of it, and I did, too. But there's things flesh and blood can't stand."

"What actually happened?" said Euphemia.

Marie's elegant figure quivered with indignation.

"'Common' indeed!" she said. "I've put up with a lot, but—common! Me that's refinement itself. Bitch, she's called me, and slut and drab and baggage and things I wouldn't repeat, and I've put up with it. But when it comes to 'common'—*Me!* Well, I walked straight out of the house."

Euphemia chuckled.

"And how did you find me here?" she said.

"I went to that Club you came from, and they told me you'd come here for the day."

"Yes, but why?" said Euphemia. "Why did you come to me?"

Marie seemed to consider this question for the first time with something of surprise.

"Well, now I come to think of it, I don't know," she said, "but somehow it seemed the ordinary thing to come to you and ask you what I was to do next. She won't give me a character, you know."

"I don't suppose she will. . . I can't get you a post as a lady's maid, but I think I can get you one as a housemaid. It's a hotel that's being reorganised. They'll want more housemaids."

Marie heaved a sigh in which resignation and relief were mingled.

"Oh, well," she said, "it's been rather a strain in a way, and it may be all for the best."

"You'll have to be Mary there, I expect, if they take you," said Euphemia. "It's a busy place, and people haven't time for Marie."

"Well, I shan't mind. I was Mary before I took up lady's maid work. And, really, the way some people pronounce it! It should be Mah-ree, you know"—she pronounced the word with the utmost refinement of accent—"and well, between you and I, the way uneducated people pronounce it—like Mairy—fairly makes me cringe."

"Yes," said Euphemia. "Now you can help us get this place straight. Come upstairs and scrub out the little bedroom. It used to be mine once. You can come back with us tonight and put up at the Y.W.C.A. hostel, near the Club, then tomorrow I'll give you a letter, and you can go to the hotel and see if they've got a job for you."

Marie adjusted the curls that lay against her cheeks, pulled down her waist and straightened herself. Her eyes grew dreamy as a succession of romantic visions projected themselves before her.

"I suppose that quite nice people go there . . ." she said.

"Oh yes," said Euphemia. "Here's an apron, and you'll find a scrubbing-brush upstairs."

XXXVI

As Euphemia came out of Mr. Craig's office she found Marie, now Mary, waiting for her in the hall. She looked neat and pretty in her housemaid's uniform, but at present her face was pale, her eyes agog.

"Oh, Miss *Tracy*!" she said, "have you seen the evening paper?"

"No. Why?"

"She's dead. . . . Look, here it is. 'DEATH OF WEALTHY RECLUSE.' Half a million she's left! And only one potato each! Do you remember?"

"What did she die of?"

Marie sank her voice to a sinister whisper.

"A stroke, they say. That Moston, if you ask *me*!"

"Nonsense!" said Euphemia. "He was well enough off, and she hadn't left him anything. Why should he? Besides, if the paper says it was a stroke, it must be a stroke."

Marie's whisper became still more sinister.

"There's poisons that look like strokes, and that Moston knows all about them, I'll bet. You've only to look at his face to see that he's a poisoner. My word! I only just got out of it in time."

"How do you mean?"

"Don't you see? Moston'd have put it on to me, sure as fate. He'd have made it all seem as if I'd done it. There was a funny look on his face the day I went, and that was it. He'd planned to poison her and put on to me. Well, he poisoned her all right, and I only just got out of it in time."

"Nonsense!" laughed Euphemia.

But she realised that the belief in Moston's guilt was meat and drink to Marie's sensation-loving soul. . . The wicked old aristocrat murdered by the sinister servant . . . the hairbreadth escape of the lovely heroine from the house of mystery. Innumerable circumstantial details would add themselves to the story as time went on.

At that moment Miss Connington wandered across the hall, the inevitable cigarette hanging from her mouth. She shook hands heartily with Euphemia, then knocked at the office door. A typist came to it to tell her that Mr. Craig was too busy to see her just then.

"He always is when you want to borrow a quid, damn him!" said Miss Connington in her sleepy voice as she turned away.

"She's quite an aristocrat, you know," whispered Marie, as the lank untidy figure disappeared up the staircase. "Queer, but with a heart of gold. She paid for the porter's wife to have an operation in the spring and made him promise not to tell anyone. It leaked out by accident, but only us know. . . . Are you coming to be housekeeper here, Miss Tracy?"

"I'm not sure," said Euphemia; "I've just been to see Mr. Craig about it. I haven't made up my mind yet. . . . You like being here, don't you?"

"I've only been a week, of course," said Marie, "but I think I'm going to like it."

Euphemia noticed that already her voice had lost the extreme gentility that had belonged to the old Marie.

They glanced to the door where the hotel 'bus had just drawn up. The driver, young and good-looking, entered with a suit-case and golf bag. He put them down in the hall and threw a quick smile at Marie before he went back to the 'bus. Marie returned it blushing.

"So that's the young man you go out with on your evening off," said Euphemia.

"How did you know?" said Marie, blushing more deeply. "Anyway, there's only been one evening so far."

"But you've arranged for the next."

"Oh yes."

"He looks very nice."

Marie sighed deeply.

"He's one of nature's gentlemen, and to a girl that's seen as much of the world as I have, what's rank?"

"What, indeed," agreed Euphemia. "Well, I must go or Dr. Marriott will be tired of waiting. Good-bye."

She went out into the drive, where Dr. Marriott was waiting in his car. His face looked tired and drawn in the sunlight, but as soon as he saw her the lines of weariness left it.

"Finished? . . . Good!" He opened the door for her. "Now where shall we go?"

"Home, I suppose."

"Nonsense! Not on a day like this. I'm going to take you for a drive."

They set off down the country road, past the half-built hotel with its air of glaring newness, its rows of unglazed windows, and the litter of rubble all around it.

"What a shame!" he said. "But it's time something gave Craig a jolt. . . . Are you going to take on the job?"

"I'm going to let him know by the end of the week."

"Going to sleep on it? Sound idea. . . . We're getting to the trees again. I'm fond of the downs, but I've a weakness for trees. They're a wonderful colour just now, aren't they? I suppose that in a fortnight's time there won't be a leaf left on them."

"Why do we just go grey and colourless as we grow old?" said Euphemia. "Wouldn't it be nice if we turned glorious colours like trees?"

She had felt wildly, exultantly happy all the way down. She had been a young girl out with her lover. She was still the young girl, but she was another woman as well—a cynical, sneering, elder woman who jeered at the young girl, tearing from her her defences of youth and happiness, making of her a figure of fun, a ridiculous travesty.

"Well, here we are," he said as he stopped the car.

She had not recognised the place till he spoke, then she saw that they were at the foot of the hill with the little stunted tree, where they had once picnicked.

"Come along," he had opened the door, "let's watch the sun set from the top, and you can see the houses where your churchyard friends live."

She smiled and went with him up to the top.

"There!" he spread out his mackintosh and they sat down. "You won't be cold?"

She shook her head. She was remembering the letters she had received that morning, one from Elaine and one from Imogen, trying to keep before her the image of herself that they conjured up—a dear old thing in whom one confided but who could have no deep emotions, no real life of her own.

"So you haven't decided about Greylands?"

"I don't think I shall take it on."

"What will you do?"

"I've always wanted a little shop."

"Yes . . . a little shop would be fun."

He spoke absently, and there was a long silence. The sun was a blaze of gold on the horizon.

"I'm going to take a partner," he said suddenly, "and drop the bulk of my work. I shall live in the country and go into town one or perhaps two days a week."

"I'm glad," she said. "You look as if you needed a rest. Where shall you live?"

"I have a house in Wiltshire. I've not lived there since I was a boy. I must get rid of the tenants."

Looking down at the sleeping valley with its little farms and homesteads, he thought of the other time when they had sat on the hill-top beneath the stunted tree. The mysterious change that this woman had wrought in him had sent him back to his first love. He had discovered soon enough that, whatever his first love had been when he worshipped her, she was now selfish and insincere.

"Do you know why I brought you here?" he asked.

"No."

"I wanted to ask you to marry me."

She stared at him, incredulous, almost horrified, as if he were making fun of her.

"Do you remember the time I came to see you at Grey-

lands," he went on, "the time I found you digging in the garden?"

"Yes."

"I knew then that I wanted you. It came to me suddenly on my way home. . . . I said nothing till now, because—I hardly thought you could want to marry me. I knew that you weren't the sort of woman to marry for a home, and I knew you enjoyed life and found it interesting. I knew, too, that you'd had a dull time nursing your father, and I was afraid that you might look on marriage as a sort of return to prison. To ask you would in that case have spoilt our friendship. . . . Then quite suddenly, while you were in with Craig this afternoon, I decided to risk it."

Both the romantic young girl and the sneering woman had disappeared. Euphemia felt as if she were suddenly called upon to consider detachedly someone else's problem. She was miles away from the couple on the hill-top. "No," she said gently, "it wouldn't do at all."

"Why not?"

"Don't you see? You've been overworking for years. Perhaps I'm the sort of woman you feel you'd like now when you're tired and overworked. But I'm not the sort of woman you'd want normally. Normally you'd want a woman of your own sort."

"I'm sick of what you call women of my own sort."

"Yes, I know. That's it. You've been dealing with them as patients for so long they've got on your nerves. That's why you feel you'd like a woman of my sort for your wife—because you're sick of the well-dressed, good-looking, cultured women who come to you as patients. But don't you see that when you're rested you'll feel different? You won't class them all with your patients. You'll realise too late that you ought to have married one of them."

He was silent for a few moments, then said.

"I don't think you're right. I know you aren't right. But even if we grant there's a risk, isn't there a risk in every marriage? There's an equal risk of your finding that you've shut yourself in a prison, of your regretting the life you've

given up. The question is, do we care for each other to take the risk."

Her eyes were fixed in the setting sun. Her love had suddenly ceased to be a girl's romantic dream. It had become an adventure—rich, colourful, fraught with danger and uncertainty.

"As long as you're doing it with your eyes open . . ." she said.

The valley was in shadow, the hill-top still touched by the last slanting rays of the sun.

"I can't believe that I've only known you for two years," he said. "I feel as if I'd known you all my life and been married to you for ten years. Does that sound very unromantic?"

"I don't think so. . . . Tell me about your house."

"It's just a small country house. There are six bedrooms upstairs. One of them has a large bay window and gets the sun all day long."

"That will do for the nursery," she said.

He shot her an amused glance.

"Nursery? You want a child?"

She laughed—her rich deep chuckle.

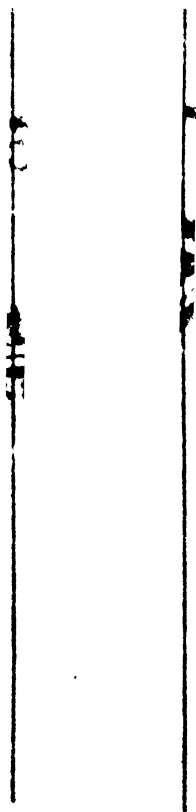
"Child! I want children."

She gazed unseeingly in front of her as if she saw the three sturdy children whom she would bear triumphantly, exultantly, in the course of the next five years.

He put his hand on hers on the grass. Her eyes were still fixed on the distance. She was seeing a woman in a purple dress standing behind the counter of a little shop. She was saying good-bye to her wistfully but without regret.

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